

# ***JUMP CUT***

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### *Tootsie* Mixed messages

by Deborah H. Holdstein

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First, the good news. TOOTSIE is a wildly successful film at the box office. And it appears that the film represents the consummate group effort: three directors, approximately twenty script rewrites (with such notables as Elaine May and the Barry Levinson/Valerie Curtin team), and Writers' Guild arbitration over who should get screen credit. TOOTSIE's dialogue seems unrelentingly witty, snappy, and downright hilarious, with filmgoers and critics alike thrilled at Hollywood's "new feminism," its raised consciousness, its preoccupation with important social issues.

And that makes the news less good. Filmgoers love TOOTSIE. Mainstream critics love TOOTSIE. Inexplicably, however, these same critics gloss over or reject the film's implicit sexism and the mixed "feminist" message that undercuts itself in deference to the system that produced the picture. It depicts women as weak, powerless, banal emotional blobs. They are saved only by a man's inspiring assertiveness in the guise of a soap-opera actress-heroine in designer blouses.

Dustin Hoffman plays two roles in TOOTSIE — Michael Dorsey, unemployed, temperamental actor, and the woman he "becomes" in order to land a job, Dorothy Michaels. He succeeds, getting the role of Emily Kimberly, hospital administrator on a successful soap. He begins to ignore girlfriend Sandy (Teri Garr) as the "Michael" that's really "behind Dorothy" begins to fall in love with his co-star, Julie (Jessica Lange). The inevitable complications ensue.

Critical response unintentionally illustrates both the film's misleading "virtues" and its implicating, patriarchal structure. Even the diction in the reviews themselves reveals that condescension toward women has been vanquished only temporarily, because "Tootsie" is really a man whose words are taken seriously:

"Michael dresses up as a hopeful actress named Dorothy

Michaels, who is a shy Southern belle until she opens her mouth. Out of that mouth comes the most *assertive and appealing kind of feminism imaginable* [emphasis added] ... Simply stated, the TOOTSIE thesis is you are what you wear. Simply by putting on a dress, Michael Dorsey becomes more polite, less contentious, and more likely to defer to his superiors ... women are so often trapped into subservience because, well, a dress is not a suit."[\(1\)](#)

Critical commentary such as this underscores the essentially patriarchal structure of TOOTSIE (not to mention the attitudes of the critics reviewing it). Michael Dorsey is not really more polite when he becomes Dorothy. If anything, it's the "manliness" of this woman that many people admire while paradoxically condemning her for her rather homely appearance.

When Michael/Dorothy goes to audition for the soap opera, s/he teaches the blatantly sexist director, Ron, a "feminist lesson." Ron wants a "broad caricature of a woman," he tells Dorothy, as power is masculine and makes a woman ugly." First, Ron's caricature as "male chauvinist pig supreme" is so broadly drawn as to be useless in teaching us anything about how people shouldn't act. No one could ever see himself in Ron, a cartoon figure who defeats any pretensions the film might have had to him as a "feminist bad example." Second, when Michael/Dorothy calls Ron a "macho shithead" and yells "Shame on you!" for Ron's stereotyped images of power, the patriarchy surfaces.

Dorothy is "unattractive." Dorothy is really a *man*. Obviously, then, the so-called "feminist message" dissolves into visual images that tell us the opposite: Dorothy is powerful in telling off Ron — Dorothy is homely. And the other women in the film are beautiful, powerless, and weak-willed. Thus, TOOTSIE perpetuates these unfortunate sexist stereotypes, as well as the antiquated assumptions about any connection between a woman's physical appearance and her intelligence. Finally, it must be remembered that the only person to successfully "call" Ron on his sexism is really a man. And, I fear, it's the only way many people in a representative audience would take such a "feminist" message seriously.

One critic acknowledges that "the movie also manages to make some lighthearted but well-aimed observations about sexism,"[\(2\)](#) while Carrie Rickey of the *Village Voice* names it to her list of the top ten films of 1982.[\(3\)](#) Pauline Kael celebrates the fact that "Michael is thinking out Dorothy while he's playing her — he's thinking out what a woman would do."[\(4\)](#) Is there no insult to the notion that it takes a *man* in woman's clothing to articulate the needs of the women around him? That it takes a *man* — perhaps radiating the strong assertiveness only *he* can "do so naturally" — to politicize and inspire the almost stereotypically weak women around him to stand on their own two feet? And, most alarmingly, that it takes a *man-as-woman*, speaking sincerely about "feminist" issues, to convince the sexists in the audience, as well?

The insult permeates the film's structure and content, especially when

one considers the initial information which types Hoffman's character. Michael Dorsey is thirty-nine, only intermittently employed as an actor but the finest of professionals. Dedicated to his acting students but picky and hellish for establishment theater folk to work with, Dorsey's characterization as a man devoted to people and his craft unfolds during the opening credit-montage. As the center of a circle of students, he's looked upon as a respected mentor, a victim of the theater establishment, a wise veteran of acting "wars." And because he's difficult to work with, his agent calls him a "cult failure." No one will hire Michael Dorsey.

Therein lies the crucial economic reason justifying his audition in woman's clothing for the role of hospital administrator Emily Kimberly on the daytime drama, "Southwestern Hospital." After all, only dire straits will justify a clothing sex change: Julie Andrews was starving to death in VICTOR/VICTORIA; Jack Lemon and Tony Curtis witnessed the St. Valentine's Day Massacre before they resorted to an all-girl band in SOME LIKE IT HOT, gangsters in pursuit. But lest we further dare to question Dorsey's heterosexuality, the scene of his surprise birthday gathering has him trying to pick up every woman at the party. The lines? "Oh, yeah, you were in *Dames at Sea* — you've got a great voice. You know, I felt like there was an aura between us in the theater." This allegedly feminist film, then, must go to great lengths to assure its audience that the protagonist is "legitimate" — straight. Dorsey seems as much of a voyeur sexist as the men he'll rail about as Dorothy.

Further, Michael justifies his role as a woman by creating a parallel between the plight of unemployed artists and women — "I've got a lot I can *say* to women." The film would have us believe that it really doesn't take much to be a woman at all, that women lack enough individuality or identity as a group that a man can "do" her very well, without anyone noticing or questioning.

In spite of this, TOOTSIE's allegedly feminist intent appears to illustrate the problems of being a woman or a man. It celebrates the inherently "wonderful sensitivity" of Michael's "feminist" inclinations and the implication that it's the "woman inside the man" that has brought him around to egalitarian insight. Not really. The film itself continually undercuts any pseudo-feminist "statements" that it tries to make through characterization, point of view, and the overall structure of the film. TOOTSIE's message is loud and clear. Only because of a man can a woman achieve any modicum of greatness or rise from the mire of self-doubt and psychological trauma. Only through a man will a mass-audience "feminist" message be taken seriously.

Michael/Dorothy's role as the sole voice for women's issues is further aggravated by the film's other women. As his suicidal-maniacal girlfriend Sandy, Teri Garr becomes, in Kael's sincere words, "the funniest neurotic dizzy on the screen."[\(5\)](#) Fine. Yet Sandy is unable to get an acting job; in fact, Michael beats her out for the Kimberly soap opera role. Michael runs lines with her before the audition, and Sandy

tells him that he does a woman better than she can! She can't even "get her rage back" for the audition unless he goes with her and "keeps her angry." Worse, Michael treats Sandy poorly, thoughtlessly victimizing her — and even stealing her job!

Jessica Lange's Julie, the woman with whom Michael falls in love while pretending to be Dorothy, is also weak and unassertive. The complication, inevitably, occurs when Julie becomes "Dorothy's" best friend. The film seems to tell us that Julie's never had such a wonderful friendship with a "woman" before, as if being close, woman-to-woman, were unnatural. Manipulated by her director/boyfriend, Ron, Julie drinks too much. Only Dorothy's advice and support and her improvised dialogue as ultra-feminist Emily Kimberly redeem Julie. And yet Lange's Julie is evidently supposed to be a "liberated" woman in the positive sense, but here again whatever liberation there is, is thoroughly undercut. A single mother in "real life," Julie plays, in her words, "the hospital slut" of the soap. Surely audience response connects the damning term "slut," given Julie's emotional insecurity and weakness, to her disorganized existence. The film subtly but unmistakably implies a parallel between her TV role and her life. When Julie believes that Michael/Dorothy is a lesbian, she acknowledges her "stirring feelings." But we remind ourselves that Dorothy's "really a man" — Julie's "feelings," therefore, must be heterosexual and "natural."

The only assertive, apparently strong woman we see in the film is the soap opera's producer. But her character remains flat and incidental, only serving the patriarchal structure of the film when she tells Dorothy/Michael: "You're a breakthrough lady for us, Dorothy. You're your own person." Evidently, even a soap opera produced by a woman never would have featured a strong, assertive woman. Only a man could have initiated a change in the patriarchal system. So not only does Michael treat Sandy badly, victimizing women in a way that parallels the Ron/Julie relationship he so despises (Ron's infidelity, his condescension, pats on Julie's rear, etc., etc.), but our only strong woman character seems to victimize women as well. She casts them as weak, unassertive, spineless sorts: roles that amplify our perceptions of them as "beautiful but weak" in their "real" lives. Only when Dorothy/Michael appears does the breakthrough occur, male-initiated.

Much of the humor in the film stems from Michael's thoughtless treatment of Sandy. Another source derives from the fact that it is convenient to be a man, at times, because being a woman apparently means ineffectuality. For example, Michael is about to try on a dress of Sandy's while she's in the shower. (He thinks it might be a good possibility for "Dorothy."). When she catches him with his clothes off, the only way for him to protect his heterosexuality is to say, "I want you, Sandy, I want you," comically walking around the room with his pants down around his ankles. As a result, however, Sandy is ultimately victimized by his sexual excuse as he falsely promises her a relationship he has no intention of fulfilling. (Before this, their relationship was platonic.) In another scene, when Dorothy/Michael needs to hail a cab,

s/he tries meekly in her "woman's" voice, then quickly yells "Taxi!" in Michael's deep baritone. Of course, the cab stops. We laugh as we did when Dorothy/Michael slammed the head of a man trying to steal a taxi from her, using packages laden with designer clothing — such assertiveness, the ability to fight for one's rights, is a "male" characteristic, the film says. A woman doing this successfully is out of character and humorous. And, if she really is a woman, she's likely to be unsuccessful in getting a taxi anyway.

Perhaps the most blatant way in which TOOTSIE undercuts its own pretensions comes when Dorothy/Michael accompanies Julie home to her father's farm for a weekend. The film's mask of "sensitivity to woman" strips away when our point of view, not only Dorothy/Michael's but the camera's, makes us sexual voyeurs. As Michael gradually falls more in love with Julie, the camera caresses Julie's opulent, peasant-dressed body in slow motion, from an omniscient point of view. This reveals the more directly patriarchal implications of the film. The voyeurism isn't criticized; rather, it reinforces the film's sexist assumptions and structure. The form, as usual, substantiates the content.

TOOTSIE also generates humor by ridiculing artists who attempt to deal with political issues. Michael becomes Dorothy in order to raise \$8,000 to finance his roommate's play, "Return to the Love Canal." As Michael's agent wryly notes, "*Nobody* wants to see these things — why spend \$20 to see a couple who moved back to chemical waste? They can see that in New Jersey." And the audience laughs in uproarious approval.

In presenting itself as a feminist film, TOOTSIE seems to follow in the footsteps of films such as 9 TO 5 and KRAMER VERSUS KRAMER, other Hollywood films purporting to sensitively deal with issues of concern to women. 9 TO 5 sold "working women a bill of goods,"<sup>(6)</sup> minimizing work issues with slapstick, fantasy, and women who were as guilty of victimization as the men who were the alleged focus of sexism in the film. In KRAMER VERSUS KRAMER, Dustin Hoffman's character fulfills the task of motherhood so easily that he goes from a man who didn't even know what grade his son was in to a perfect woman/mother in six months. Because woman's work isn't valued, Kramer's newfound vocation is cause for the film's pivotal emotional scenes. When men do what had before been only women's work, it becomes the stuff of which epics are made.

We ultimately learn that not only does it take a man to do work well but also that it takes a man to be a "good," powerful, assertive "woman." When Andrew Sarris marvels that Hoffman "has soared with Jessica Lange into the stratosphere of redemptive romance in a rare display of mutual enhancement,"<sup>(7)</sup> Sarris misses the point. At the end, their relationship reconciled, Michael and Julie walk down the street arm in arm, her directionless personal life saved by Michael's presence. And the camera freezes for the final credits. However, Julie was redeemed only because of "a man and his strength" in its most stereotyped form. The



film's final freeze-frame perhaps emphasizes the immutability of a manipulative, patriarchal system under the guise of feminist inspiration.

## Notes

I wish to thank Norene Chesebro, Scott Chesebro, and Roger Gilman for their helpful participation in discussions about TOOTSIE.

[1.](#) Gene Siskel, *Chicago Tribune*, 17 December 1982, Section 3, pp. 1-2.

[2.](#) Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*, 17 December 1982, pp. 63-64.

[3.](#) Carrie Rickey, "The Ten Best," *Village Voice*, January 1983, p. 40. Rickey's article, however, illustrates TOOTSIE's appeal to many audiences: whitewashed "transvestitism," another source of titillation and humor. The movie is mildly kinky entertainment, uncritical of its own inconsistencies. Rickey writes:

"1982 will be remembered as a dragfest, a cross-dressers' paradise. May I propose an award ... for Best Performance in a Transvestite Role?"

[4.](#) Pauline Kael, "The Current Cinema: Tootsie, Gandhi, and Sophie," *The New Yorker*, 27 December 1982, pp. 68-72.

[5.](#) Ibid., p. 72.

[6.](#) Carol Slingo, et al., "9 TO 5: Blondie Gets the Boss," JUMP CUT, No. 24/25, p. 8.

[7.](#) Andrew Sarris, "Why TOOTSIE Works and SOPHIE Doesn't," *Village Voice*, 21 December 1982, pp. 71-72.

### *Diner*

## The politics of nostalgia

by Deborah H. Holdstein

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By now, we've all heard that *DINER* is the previously unsung (now, we can assume, sung) "sleeper" of this past film season. Heralded as "sensitive" and a "mix of nostalgia and autobiography" by Chicago film critic David Kerr (*Chicago Reader*, 9 July 1982), *DINER* seems to fit neatly into a rather ambiguously-titled category: the "slice-of-life nostalgia piece," the recognizable plight of a group of young men growing up in the Baltimore of 1959. Critics nationally echo Kerr's sentiment, as words such as "touching" and references to Levinson's "thoughtful" story and direction appear in writings as diverse as Gene Siskel's (2 July 1982, *Chicago Tribune*) and Pauline Kael's (5 April 1982, *New Yorker*).

Yet as Proust discovered when he bit into the madeleine, nostalgia and the things remembered often reveal more than one initially thought. Perhaps our popular critics have forgotten this, as in the case with *DINER*, a film whose strengths go far beyond those of a pleasant film on which writer/ director Barry Levinson has "imposed a light layer of thought and analysis" (Kerr, *Reader*).

On the one hand, the film troubles many viewers — women and men alike — who see it as an exclusive, wholly "male" film, celebrating the joys and trials of being a "good-young-boy" in a transitional, important stage. Indeed, women are in peripheral roles in *DINER* as they have been at the periphery of the patriarchy. Levinson merely duplicates or at best "mirrors life-as-it-was in a characteristic U.S. film and literary genre. But, it is easily argued, these young men have a place in society — unlike the women in the film — which insures most of them a fairly good lot in life.

On the other hand, with the clarity of hindsight, I find certain social truths more readily revealed in older films and occasionally in films that purport to celebrate the painful-but-engaging "good old days." That is, even if Levinson did not intend to make a film offering an expressly

political commentary, DINER does reveal that the patriarchy victimizes even those who are the victimizers: men.

So while DINER is an overtly entertaining, pleasant, and, yes, "sensitive" film, my reading may permit it to be an important one. DINER does remind us of those simple, black-and-white days of 1959 (huge, oversized picture tubes, GE COLLEGE BOWL, blissfully raw rock 'n roll). But it also recalls the fact that even the films we call "entertainment" can be essentially political — even without the director/writer's deliberate intention, and often in spite of it.

DINER vividly etches the lives of young men (and very few women) with a cross-section of the U.S., white, Eastern population. It unintentionally but vividly illustrates that the patriarchal status quo also stifles men. Within the first sequence, DINER sets up numerous parallel oppositions which it sustains throughout: people versus society, men versus women, men versus men, the media versus daily reality, and men's fantasy-women versus the women men marry. For each of these pairs, Levinson reveals, if unintentionally, the hypocrisy within us all, within the myths that sustain young men through their young adulthood while threatening their very existence, their sense of themselves.

The film makes striking parallels between popular culture and the media and their integration within one's sense of self. The characters' "machismo," their preoccupations with the media, their bets about "making it" with certain women, aren't as much the villainy of traditional sexism as frantic signs of their knowing no other way to be in the world.

Thus, Boogie uses the automobile and the movies as a forum for his sexual conquests. Although the film presents him as a more tender version of the "macho mystique," part of his image includes his specifically noting his "conquests." Eddie, the football expert, will get married because "it's time, you know, and she's not a ball-breaker. If she was a ball-breaker, then, well, man, *no way*." Ball-breaking or its equivalent seems fine when it comes from the man's direction, however. Out of his own insecurity, Eddie designs for his fiancée a fabulously difficult "ball-breaking football quiz." If she scores lower than a 65, he'll call the wedding off.

Most viewers perhaps rightly view DINER as a slice of the oppressive life, an ultimately celebratory view of men in their traumatic years. But to see the film only as this, in my view, doesn't acknowledge the injustices we all suffer within the same, oppressive system. DINER may be erroneously conceived as mere apolitical nostalgia by audience and critic alike. The film's structure and deceptively simple technical style belie the suffering and trials that go along with being a man or woman in the capitalist world, as well as realizing an unarticulated but desperately obvious need for a comprehensive male and female release from a constricting status quo.

I propose an expansion of the term "political film," since many film

critics propagate a restrictive, assumptive definition, implying that if a film is not expressly "political," i.e., dealing in a "political theme," then its content cannot be political at all. (In my view, this would parallel the view of women we see in most films, implying to the woman in the audience that she cannot be other than a peripheral figure in a man's world.) Occasionally good, politically instructive and uplifting messages can come in small, rather delightful, witty packages — even those like *DINER*, which seem apolitical or at best a standard-bearer for the patriarchy.

In a Sunday edition of the *New York Times* (18 July 1982), critic Robert Sklar discusses the fate of the "political film," using terms that restrict the genre to films that handle "hot issues":

“If you have a message, ran the old Hollywood maxim, send it by Western Union. Movies aren't meant to be about the real world. Forget elections and politicians, strikes and working conditions, race and class antagonisms, dictators and foreign wars. People go to movies to escape all that.”

But as many filmgoers realize, people don't escape "all that," especially when we view much of what we see on the screen (eliminating, of course, science fiction, fantasy, costume drama, etc.) to be representational and "real" mirrors of the way we are or should be in the world. The politics are subliminal, built into such things as characterization, social class, and the entire narrative.

Sklar does his movie-going public a disservice by limiting his definition of "political films" to those treating expressly "political subjects" such as war in *PATHS OF GLORY*, Vietnam in *COMING HOME*, injustice and poverty in *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*, and political satire vs. nuclear destruction in *DR. STRANGELOVE*. The political film cannot merely be a genre which specifically treats "social problems." The political film can encompass all film, particularly those which, innocuously hidden behind Hollywood or popular sanctions, seem least political. What is more "political" than the relation between women and the world? Of human beings trying to find a place in a society that defies them to do it?

My reading of *DINER* comes out of this contention. The Hollywood genre film implies political and social content through its allegedly simplistic structures, characters, and plots. Behind these lie assumptions about class, patriarchy, and our places within these. If Aristotle was correct in believing that art teaches by holding up a mirror to the realities of our society, then I believe *DINER* has several lessons for us.

To my mind, *DINER*'s political dimension is evident from the opening sequence. In fact, the lack of a dominant contrast within a crowded, messy, mise-en-scene may confuse viewers: we're not sure where we're supposed to be looking. What seems to be Levinson's lack of technique reinforces one of the movie's significant qualities: the "every person" within each human being, as well as the uniqueness of those on the

screen and those in the audience. The sequence emphasizes that whatever the soon-to-be-determined main characters have to go through is something identifiable to each person at the crowded sock-hop and to each person in the audience. In effect, Levinson begins the film against the grain of cinematic status quo. This will not be a film of fantasy or "stars," and our heroes will not be notable in the traditional sense of the word. In this first scene, they blend in with the crowded scenery — they're just people.

Consequently, the opening content, apparently hampered by muffled dialogue and a seeming lack of visual center, may become somewhat lost. Visually, in the background we see some of the men who will later emerge as protagonists, talking excitedly, while couples in 1959-vintage finery jitterbug in the fore- and middle-ground. Only after a first cut do we realize that Boogie (a representative of the upwardly-mobile working class, who goes to law school to impress women) has learned that Fenwick (who has a rather meager stipend from the family trust fund and represents "old money") has gotten drunk again and is wandering in the dance hall basement, breaking windows with his fist "for a smile." Fenwick has just sold his date for five dollars to another young man (out of insecurity, we later learn). His action is described so that it seems incidental to the scene, but it reflects and foreshadows much of the film. The male characters treat women as buyable and sellable. All this isn't condoned by the director, but it parallels the possession-consciousness of the 1950s: "having" represented status, whether having a record collection or a wife.

The most important narrative information here seems to be that Boogie hopes to break out of the working class through law school, and that Boogie and Fenwick pair in an exemplary illustration of male bonding. We begin to understand that Boogie and the others are Fenwick's superegos, bailing the insecure youth out of his drunken pranks. And it is in this early scene that young men's architectural metaphor for collective bonding is first announced: "See you later at the diner."

The diner itself stands as the major fantasy metaphor of the film. It becomes a sort of "ivory tower" in which the men are protected. The waitresses do the men's bidding (and usually are the only women there), circulating on a first-name basis within the male arena. The diner houses most of Boogie's confrontations with the loan shark. But since he's later bailed out of his debt by a friend of his late father, he never has to "do battle." The diner creates a playworld for verbal machismo. And the playland contrasts with home. Food, nurturing, love, are commodities always available at the diner, always on credit of need be, with few if any questions asked.

Media and the sports are constant topics of conversation. Relations with women become either occasions for male competition and/or male bonding, or they become secondary in importance to male concerns with media and sports. We see this in the way Eddie expresses his fear of change and women. As he says to Billy, his best man at his wedding, "If

you talk, you always got the guys at the diner — you don't need a *girl* to talk." Eddie asks Billy to reaffirm the impossible — that things will always stay the same and never change. He wants men to be able to stay the same, "exclusive," leaving women outside the circle. Indirectly, Eddie seems to be pleading for a way out of the same expectations he's been raised with, for a solution to his poor preparation for interacting with another human being, a woman. Each of the men, in his own way, clings to the familiar male clique he's become so comfortable with. The male characters do not just exhibit a typical fear of change. Rather, they seem to constantly express a wish for a way out — that is, to have the night-long conversations with men at the diner. The men at the diner illustrate the products of a society that hasn't prepared them — or allowed them — to cope.

Shrevie (the married one) works in a television sales shop. There, June Allyson appears in mid-fifties splendor in a televised film crying, "Oh, I'm never getting married, never!" Shrevie's employment fits him well: his identity is especially tied to popular culture, rock 'n roll. He tells Eddie that he and his wife Beth never have more than a five-minute conversation, but that with the guys "he can talk all night."

Shrevie uses his specialized knowledge as a weapon with which to victimize Beth. He arranges his records in a complicated, alphabetical-chronological fashion. Since Beth doesn't have his zeal for music nor his obsessive knowledge of dates, flip sides, and artists, she does not carefully rearrange the discs she's played. The couple's argument about this not only humiliates her but also delineates the non-existent foundations of many traditional marriages. Marriage is just something to do, allowing the man to have and possess a wife. Shrevie and Beth's fight masks the real issues of their relationship. Women are to be closed out of the man's world. Could she share his love of music even if she knew all the trivia? As Shrevie says:

"Before you get married, all there is is talk about the wedding — the — plans, you know, and sex talk. You know, when can we DO it? Are your parents going to be out so we can DO it? Where can we DO it? Then, after you get married, she's there all the time; when you wake up in the morning, she's there. When you come home from work, she's there ... There's no more sex talk. Nothing else to talk about ... But it's really good, you know, it's ok, it's good."

While Beth and Shrevie's marriage is apparently reconciled at the film's end, Levinson vividly depicts their marriage as one in role only. DINER presents men in their early twenties who apparently have been so discouraged from truly interacting with other human beings, women, that Shrevie finds his only true marriage with his buddies at the diner.

Beth, on the other hand, doesn't even "feel pretty anymore." She softly says, "I don't even know who I am." Her acceptance by and success with men seem to have rested entirely on her looks — this seems to have been the sole reason for her marriage. When she feels "shut out" from the

man's world and loses her entire self-esteem, she uses "femininity" as the way to survive. She's not been allowed to develop any interests, as have the men. As a prisoner of society's "decorative" expectations, she hasn't considered developing the rest of herself, either. And the men's obsessive preoccupation with popular culture, as in Shrevie's case, these pseudo-scholarly defenses against human — male and female — involvement and interaction, have affected the women cruelly.

Boogie decides to use the discouraged, neglected Beth to replace a girlfriend who had gotten the flu. One night, unbeknownst to either woman, Boogie had bet a good deal of money that he'd "ball" the first girl friend, and that several of his cronies would hide in a closet to watch. Beth appears satisfied and no longer angry when Boogie later confesses that he indeed "respects her" and couldn't have gone through with it. However, Beth wraps her entire view of herself on whether or not Boogie means what he said: that prior to her marriage, she had really been a "hot number," "really good." This sequence reveals the sadness of both characters' plight: Boogie's need to be a cool, slick "operator" to reinforce his sense of maleness, and Beth's need to remain the perfect, desirable decoration even though she's married, a "drudge."

Our relief at what appears to be Boogie's moral decision clouds when we realize how sad it is that the characters' means toward self-worth is so narrowly defined. Unfortunately, Beth and Boogie are — like the others — the perfect products of their society. That society provided them an ironic "nurturing incapacity," which made them prisoners within their prescribed roles. DINER depicts the final conversation between Beth and Boogie with a simple, eye-level two-shot, both characters leaning against Boogie's car. This mise-en-scene technically underscores the sad "equality" of their role-imprisonment.

Another fantasy-reality dichotomy is at play within the Shrevie-Beth-Boogie connection in DINER. Beth must wear a blond wig during the scene with Boogie in which she's his "substitute date" so that the other fellows will think she's the "hot number," Carol. Masquerade becomes even more crucial now that Boogie's really out with his best friend's wife. In fact, Boogie doesn't know that Beth's husband Shrevie had joined Fenwick (hiding in the apartment closet) to witness the sexual conquest.

Shrevie observes Beth and Boogie from an upper window as they arrive, not recognizing the woman he's married to, the woman who for inexplicable reasons is not good enough for him. He comments, "Wow, there's Carol. Oh, God, she's beautiful." Of course, in the dark he doesn't really see her at all. But the fantasy perception of beauty triumphs as always — what we imagine our gods or goddesses to be, they are. Predictably here she's blonde, tall, perfect, wasp — or as the men in DINER call their most desirable type, "death."

Beth seems to be the everywoman who ever felt left out by her man. Her place seems several steps physically and psychologically behind the joking, secret-sharing "guys," begging for clarification like the youngest child who isn't old enough to share in her older siblings' most wonderful

games: "Well, who's that?" or "Who's that you're talking about?" Women aren't male enough, "regular" enough to know things right off. And of course, she never goes to the diner.

Levinson reveals, however, that women aren't the only ones who are victimized. Fenwick of the meager trust fund provides a striking, poignant, tragic example. Interestingly, the film shows his plight at its extreme by having him interact with popular culture images — another media parallel.

Fenwick's need for attention is so great that he arranges his own arrest while drunkenly ruining the manger scene decorations in front of a local church on Christmas day. He, in fact, removes his clothes and comfortably ensconces himself in the cradle of the child Jesus. He then fights against his friends who try to get him into the car before the police arrive. Later he breathes an audible sigh of relief as his mission, an arrest, is accomplished — and he sets off for a night in jail.

Fenwick obviously craves attention from his friends in a rather unique, often destructive sort of way, and one might wonder if it was the only way he could get any attention as a child. The film implies that he has suffered his insecurities, at the hands of his older, tight-lipped brother, the forbidding Howard, as well as his father. The obvious symbolism of Fenwick-infant's need for attention and his victimization by his immediate family and society culminates in this manger sequence. Here, the inscrutable, carved faces of the "wise men" look mutely on in a series of quick, medium-close cuts. And we also see Fenwick's growing dependence on alcohol. After this escapade, Fenwick is more than just ignored and scorned by his father and older brother. They insist that he spend the night in jail rather than be bailed out, like his friends, because "it would be good for him, teach him responsibility." His plea for attention is completely misunderstood, as are his abilities.

Fenwick's talents are seen only in his private life. His shining moment comes as he watches and talks back to a broadcast of the old TV series, GE COLLEGE BOWL. With bright, intelligent eyes and quick, sharp responses, Fenwick gets the answers — tough questions, too — before the "nerds" from Cornell or Byrn Mawr can even think to ring their answer-buzzers. His handsome face in medium close up is shot at slightly high angle. The strength of his intellectuality is perhaps technically dwarfed to illustrate his vulnerability, his victimization, the hopelessness of his plight within a society that perceives him as a bum for rejecting the family business.

In fact, Fenwick's loyalty to his friends is so great — another trait unappreciated by his family — that he tells Boogie that he will visit his brother to ask for a loan to help Boogie out of his financial crisis. This is significant, for Fenwick hates his brother — and with good reason. The next sequence, then, heightens our vision of Fenwick's entrapment. He meets his brother Howard on Howard's front lawn because Howard won't let him inside; he's a "bad example." Howard scornfully tells Fenwick: "If you had a job, you would have the money to help your



friend out yourself. I'm going to ask father to lower your stipend." And in direct, contrapuntal insult to the scene we've just witnessed — which revealed Fenwick's vast store of knowledge, his sharp, quick abilities and kindness towards his friends — Howard bites, "Have you ever even read a book?" And in technical contrast, Fenwick here is pushed off to the left side of the screen, while the taller, more formidable Howard dominates the right. Even when Fenwick backs his brother up against a tree, trying in vain to convince him of the importance of his mission ("I hate you, Howard, I despise you, but I'm here. Doesn't that say something? I'm here anyway"), here Fenwick appears in the image very much "below" Howard. His powerlessness is emphasized by an over-the-shoulder shot from near Howard's point of view, taken at high angle.

The high angle enforces the viewer's sense of Fenwick's vulnerability, entrapment, and victimization within the system that rightly "should" be his. We witness the paralysis that befalls young men who are not encouraged to develop their own strengths, especially if they diverge from the interests of the "family business" or society at large. They are damned for being themselves, so that Fenwick's private use of television is fine for showing off — it doesn't talk back, judge, condemn, or force Fenwick to display his talents publicly, to risk anything. Unfortunately, he tries to get attention by public displays of "bad behavior." Since apparently he's never been praised for being "good" in any way, much less in his own way, "badness" is all that's ever worked as an attention-getter. One surprising result of looking at DINER as a political film stems from seeing men become the other eventual victims of their own patriarchal system.

In another instance where the media serves as metaphor, Billy, a college student from out of town who will be Eddie's best man, wants to marry Barbara, a television producer. In this instance, the media helps foreshadow an early manifestation of feminism. Barbara, although pregnant in pre-liberation United States, rightly fears that she'll jeopardize her budding career as a television producer, and refuses to marry Billy. As the couple is arguing, their particular, rather poignant situation parallels the TV soap operas that beam from monitors at Barbara's studio: the dialogue of characters on TV could well be theirs. The soap operas reflect real life, and vice-versa, we are to believe.

Television here pinpoints DINER's use of media images: popular culture, television, sports, cars, rock 'n roll, all become a way of identifying, of joining people in a common interest because there are indeed "popular." At the same time, however, they ironically become a way of only superficially sharing with others, while in fact dividing identities and keeping people from one another. Popular culture divides Shrevie and Beth, and superficial outlets for Fenwick and Eddie (not to mention Eddie's football-oppressed bride-to-be). And of course, television images undercut the already uncertain discussion between Barbara and Billy about their very fragile relationship. In this instance, the media images within the mise-en-scene deflate the importance of Barbara's legitimate beliefs. While the filmed soap opera may be

mockery, the issues the couple discusses are significant enough that Levinson's message is mixed.

Some of DINER's most overriding images come through dialogue — funny dialogue that reveals truths about people coming up against society's expectations of them. As marriage-shy Eddie tells one of his friends, "I keep thinking I'm going to be missing out on things." The response: "Well, that's what marriage is all about" And when Billy tells Eddie that Barbara won't marry him, Eddie's response indicates how "simple" it would all be (especially given the false expectations he's been raised with): you get a part-time job, study for your MBA, the baby comes, and everybody's happy. "What about *her* job?" Billy asks, in early stirrings of feminism. "I give you an answer," Eddie retorts, "and you confuse it by bringing *her* into it. You're dealing with an *irrational girl*, that's the problem." Eddie's response to Billy's complaints about Barbara reveals Eddie's wish for simplicity in life that doesn't even exist (as his own behavior illustrates). Eddie's silly and laughable response (especially to us in 1982) rings an unfortunate truth. Many who profess otherwise would still hope that just worrying about one partner, preferably everybody worrying just about the man, would keep things simple.

The final sequence brings the film full circle: we began with the sixth "buddy," the man we deal with least in the film. It ends with him, as well, because he gets up at Eddie's wedding to tell some funny stories and give the toast. As he talks, the camera pans among the young faces of the five men on whom the film focuses, men we've come to care about for different reasons. We have noted their ingrained sexism and their insecurities. But we've understood their hypocrisies and sensed the "forecasts" for their individual lives. We get a final chance here to wrap up all the things we've learned about each as the camera rests momentarily on their faces, in reaction shots to the speaker. The poignancy of the moment, however, is interrupted by the inevitable "bouquet throwing," where the flowers travel in slow motion and land smack in the middle of our men's table. In my view, they perceive those flowers with the same surprise with which they will probably perceive the 1960's, just beginning. Men ending up with the bride's bouquet might appropriately foreshadow the rather "surprising" attempts at political and social change to come. Just as the bouquet's destiny is a reversal, given these young men's struggles as we've witnessed them throughout DINER, they might take the 60s as good and bad news, for at least the old struggles were familiar ones.

DINER is a funny, warm, often poignant, ultimately human film in its implied plea for human freedom from the "blessings of civilization." Through its numerous parallels and apparent dichotomies, its particularly interesting use of the media as metaphor reveals a film that goes beyond the "personal memoir" genre to which it has been allocated. Within this reading, DINER is political in the sense that it pinpoints the inherent misanthropy of a system — one that victimizes not only women, but also men. In this sense, perhaps men might celebrate a film

that addresses ways in which men are also "imprisoned." Yet perhaps male critics' failure to celebrate DINER beyond the personal memoir, or to reveal their understanding of their own liberation issues, indicates their hesitation to bite the hand of a system that continues to feed them — at least most of the time — and rather well, at that.

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### *Poltergeist* Suburban ideology

by Douglas Kellner

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Steven Spielberg is emerging as the dominant ideologue of affluent middle class America. In *JAWS* (1975), Spielberg depicts the transformation of Chief Brody from an antiheroic everyman, incapable of either stemming the economic and political corruption on the island or eliminating the shark, to a middleclass hero-redeemer who single-handedly destroys the shark and restores order to the community.<sup>(1)</sup> Brody thus becomes the first of Spielberg's middle class heroes. Whereas the novel *Jaws* showed the sexual and class antagonisms between Brody and his wife, the film projects their closeness and love, presenting one of Spielberg's first idealizations of the middle-class family.

Although *CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE THIRD KIND* (1977) shows the Richard Dreyfuss character torn away from his family and allegorically depicts the family's being torn apart by events and forces outside of its control, *POLTERGEIST* and *E.T.* elaborate idealized views of the family and the suburban middle class. Spielberg seems the most effective cinematic chronicler of affluent middle-class life-style, joys, and fears in contemporary U.S. society. *CLOSE ENCOUNTERS*, *POLTERGEIST*, and *E.T.* affectionately depict the commodity comforts offered by a consumer society. *POLTERGEIST* and *E.T.* show the rising affluence in the split-level suburban tract houses with their ever more advanced electronic media, toys, appliances, and gadgets. Spielberg celebrates this lifestyle and can be seen as film's dominant spokesperson for middle-class values and social roles.

Most interesting in Spielberg's recent films is his symbolic projection of contemporary U.S. insecurities and fears. *CLOSE ENCOUNTERS* allegorically presents fears of losing one's family, job, and home. Also, it contains a scarcely disguised yearning for salvation through extraterrestrial forces, for deliverance from contemporary problems — a theme also present in *E.T.* but more pronounced in the novelization than in the film. In its depiction of UFOs and aliens, the film reverses

the 1950s alien-invasion films codes, which depicted aliens as monstrous threats to the existing order. CLOSE ENCOUNTERS, POLTERGEIST and E.T. contain the fantasy that somehow beneficent forces will alleviate' threats to our security and well-being.

Ideologically, Spielberg's films traverse a contradictory field that in different films, or even in different scenes within a given film, celebrate and legitimate middle-class U.S. institutions and lifestyles or yearn for spiritual transcendence or both. E.T. mobilized its alien figure to highlight the commodities and joys of suburban family life — without, interestingly enough, the figure of the Law of the Father. The film depicts an alliance between the middle class and transcendent alien forces. God may no longer be on our side, but the aliens seem to be. The film reassures the middle class about their values and lifestyle and offers fantasies of reassurance that alien forces or the Other will be friendly and not threatening.

POLTERGEIST, on the other hand, symbolically probes both universal and specifically contemporary U.S. fears. It presents the shadow-side of suburban life in the form of an allegorical nightmare. It also has an utopian vision of the family's pulling together and pulling through in the face of adversity and eventually triumphing over demonic forces. By articulating U.S. fears and showing them conquered, the film defuses the nightmare quality of life in the U.S. horror show. By depicting with affection its residents, houses, goods, toys, and electronics, it presents advertisements for a U.S. way of life which defines happiness in terms of middle-class lifestyle and consumption.

Spielberg's films thus stand as clever ideological fables and do not just offer the pure fantasy entertainment which his defenders celebrate. His films are meticulously constructed ideology machines, planned in detail with elaborate storyboard models, well-crafted scripts, and cunningly planned-out special effects. Although he may or may not be a class-conscious ideologue, Spielberg's effectiveness as a purveyor of ideology derives from his identification with the affluent middle class and its way of life, which he appealingly reproduces.

Here I want to examine POLTERGEIST for what it shows about contemporary US society and Spielberg's ideological stratagems.<sup>(2)</sup> The film attempts to manipulate its audience through carefully planned, carefully paced jolts, special effects, frightening scenes, sentimental depictions of a loving family, and the assuring presence of technology, professionals, and spiritual powers. I shall first focus on POLTERGEIST's storyline, themes and ideology. Then I shall reflect on Spielberg's ideological problematic and his use of the occult.

#### A CUNNING IDEOLOGICAL FABLE FOR OUR TIME

POLTERGEIST depicts the trials of the Freeling family confronted with poltergeists, which haunt their house and spirit away their daughter, and with corpses, which return to life and destroy their house. The film uses the conventions of the horror-occult film, currently the most

popular Hollywood genre, to explore suburban middle-class psychic and social landscape. The family unit contains a father, Steve Freeling, his wife, Diane, a teenage daughter, Dana, who is more connected to her friends than to her family, a young boy, Robbie, and little Carole Anne, who is about five and the first to make contact with the poltergeists. The Freelings live in one of the first houses built in phase one of a housing project called Cuesta Vista. The father is a successful real estate salesperson who has sold 42 percent of the housing units in the area — which his boss tells him represents over \$70 million worth of property.

The opening scenes depict the Freeling family's environment and show close, loving relations between mother and father, parents and children. The film's power derives from its portraying the family's pulling together in the face of forces trying to tear it apart. Such positive images of the family have become increasingly rare in Hollywood, which instead in recent years has celebrated the couple or the single (usually male) parent or has ironically and satirically dissected family life and marriage (e.g. Robert Altman, Woody Allen). *POLTERGEIST* thus offers solace that the family stands as a viable institution, even in the context of contemporary troubles. It is one of the few "blockbuster" films that explicitly and unabashedly offer apologetics for the family.

The Freeling family idyll soon becomes interrupted by the poltergeists' presence. At first, they appear only to little Carole Anne through the medium of the television set. The poltergeists soon begin, however, more actively intervening. They shake the house, turn on appliances, bend and play with kitchen utensils, and make chairs slide across the floor. These scenes, I believe, celebrate middle-class commodity icons, showing the consumer society's bounty. During the night, the poltergeists become more menacing. In the midst of a thunderstorm, branches of a giant tree take Robbie out of the bedroom window; his parents desperately retrieve him from the forces of raging nature. At this point, little Carole Anne disappears and the family is thrown into panic.

The father then goes to Stanford and summons a group of parapsychologists to come investigate the phenomena. They in turn call in a diminutive woman spiritualist who tells the family how to deal with the poltergeists and how to get their daughter back. With the spiritualist's guidance, the mother enters the spirit world to retrieve her daughter, revealing the depth of her love and concern for the child. The mother emerges as the moral center of the film — and of the family. In Diane Freeling, *POLTERGEIST* presents a positive image of the New Mother, who is able to smoke dope, be sexy and modern, and yet also be a loved wife and nurturing mother. In response to the women's movement's critique of "women's place," Spielberg and company answer with the image of a mother who assumes her traditional role while she enjoys suburban affluence. The film thus cleverly supports traditional roles and institutions while it presents symbolic threats to the existing order.

As the film proceeds, it shows the house and its objects being

progressively demolished. At first, objects fly around and are broken and shattered. Eventually the whole house is totally destroyed. These scenes play on fears of losing one's home in this era of rising unemployment, inflation, and economic hard times. The film evokes the horror of watching loved objects smashed, of seeing the tokens of the middle class systematically disintegrate. Finally the film offers a fable about the family's walking away from the ruins of suburban affluence with the comforting assurance that the evil spirits have been vanquished, that the family is still intact, and that all will be well.

The "explanation" for the series of poltergeist disturbances is that the real estate development company, for which the father works, had built the housing project over a graveyard after removing the headstones but not removing the corpses. In the film's occultist text, the spirits of the dead wander about in a purgatorial spiritual dimension. They are unable to leave purgatory for the white light of bliss and apparently angered by their burial ground's desecration. After the corpses apocalyptically destroy the house over that burial ground, Steve yells at his boss, "You moved the cemetery. But you left the bodies, didn't you! You son-of-a-bitch, you left the bodies and only moved the headstones!"

Such a plot device highlights a critical theme in Spielberg's films and allows us to define more precisely the specificity of his ideological problematic. Clearly the villain is the greedy real estate developer who neglected to rebury the corpses to save time and money. Similarly, the villain of JAWS is the corrupt business-political establishment, which puts economic interests over people's safety and well-being. Spielberg does not defend the capitalist class or the economic and political elite. His representations of the state and political establishment tend to be critical. CLOSE ENCOUNTERS was initially intended to be a UFO Watergate-style cover-up, with the state's suppressing information about UFOs. This theme gets displaced in the film, but the state authorities still appear a bit menacing and sinister in the look of the film. Likewise, E.T. tends to present the adult world and especially state authorities from a low camera angle, the perspective of E.T. and the children. Consequently, state authorities usually appear threatening and sinister, even at the end when it appears that they are trying to save E.T.

Spielberg thus champions the middle-class ideologue but not the economic or political establishment. His strategies reveal a crisis of ideology in the United States, where its most powerful and effective ideologues working in the cinematic cultural industries cannot or will not concoct ideological fables to legitimate the *economic* and *political* order. Legitimizing these domains was precisely the ideological achievement of many films in Old Hollywood. But Capital and the State no longer have many successful ideological champions in Hollywood, although they may have in network television, albeit with contradictions and questionable success.

## SPIELBERG'S OCCULTISM

Spielberg's most popular recent films, from CLOSE ENCOUNTERS to

POLTERGEIST, participate in the *resurgence of the occult*, which has occurred in both Hollywood films and U.S. society since the end of the 1960s. When individuals perceive that they do not have control over their lives, they become attracted to occultism. During eras of socioeconomic crisis when people have difficulty coping with social reality, the occult seems to help explain incomprehensible events, with the aid of religious or spiritualist mythologies. Many recent occult films have served as vehicles for blatantly reactionary religious ideologies (e.g., THE EXORCIST, THE OMEN). Other filmmakers like George Romero, Wes Craven, and Larry Cohen have used the occult to present critical visions of U.S. society.<sup>(3)</sup> In contrast, Spielberg's use of the occult is neither systematically conservative-reactionary nor critical-subversive. Rather, it is marked by ambiguities which characterize his ideological problematic as a whole.

On one hand, Spielberg uses the occult to present rational contemporary fears: losing one's home, seeing one's family torn apart, fear of disease and bodily disintegration. For instance, in one of the most frightening scenes in POLTERGEIST, a young Stanford scientist goes to the kitchen and takes a steak out of the refrigerator. We see the piece of meat undergo a cancer-like metastasis, spewing out bizarre growths and organs before our eyes. The frightened scientist goes into the bathroom and washes his face and then looks into the mirror and sees his face mutate into rotting flesh. Although this hallucination disappears, he leaves the house and does not return. The scene is truly frightening, as it evokes fears of cancerous growth and bodily disintegration.

On the other hand, Spielberg's occultism serves as a vehicle to promote sentimental irrationalism. In his recent films, he constructs a spiritualist metaphysics out of representations of beneficent aliens, extrasensory perception, spirits, poltergeists, and magic (i.e., the children's flying in E.T.). Fantasy and science fiction offer, of course, legitimate areas for film to explore. But the ubiquity of the occult in Spielberg's recent films provides an irrational worldview that feeds the already rampant irrationalism in U.S. society (i.e., religious revivalism, cults, "new age" spiritualism, etc.). Moreover, his occultist fables deflect people's legitimate fears onto irrational forces and create the false impression that deliverance will come from spiritual or extraterrestrial forces. Whereas a critical hermeneutic might find interesting symbolic projections of middle-class fears that relate to real socioeconomic crisis, most of the audience probably experiences these symbolic projections as deflections of their real fears, escape from contemporary U.S. monsters. As the films promote irrationalism and occultism, they cover over, rather than reveal, the origins, nature, and impact of the U.S. nightmare on people's lives.

Yet the weakest part of POLTERGEIST comes from the didactic occultism enunciated by the diminutive woman spiritualist, Tangina, who comes to help rescue Carole Anne and cleanse the house of the poltergeists. In two long, talky passages, she delineates the phenomenology of the spirit world and explains the source of Carole



Anne's problems and the poltergeist disturbances. Throughout the film the viewer sees manifestations of the spirit world and is thus led to believe in the existence of spirits and an afterlife. Here Spielberg recycles old religious-spiritualist ideologies to reassure the audience about its deepest fears (i.e., descent into death, nonbeing, total nothingness) and provides a set of metaphysical representations useful for traditional, religious ideologies.

Spielberg provides reassuring fantasies that soothe fears concerning disintegration in this life (i.e., the family, the American dream, etc.) and in an afterlife. One of the tasks of cinematic ideology is to enunciate fears and then to soothe them. Spielberg magnificently accomplishes this in his fables of reassurance. While the contemporary United States is wracked with deep doubts and fears concerning its socioeconomic, political, and cultural system, Spielberg plays on these fears, finds (perhaps unconsciously) cinematic representations for them, and offers fantasies of reassurance. His ideology machines are popular precisely because of their effectiveness in enunciating and defusing such contemporary fears. Much more interestingly than the mindless, reactionary drivel concocted by George Lucas, Steven Spielberg has become the dominant ideologue of the middle class. However, now that he has become wealthy and powerful, it will be interesting to see if he moves on to become an ideologue for the economic-political establishment. In the meantime, it is as ideological fables that Spielberg's films should be interpreted and criticized.

## Notes

[1.](#) On the transformation of Brody to hero-redeemer, see the discussion in John Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The American Monomyth* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977). On the class problematics of JAWS, see Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Social Text* 1 (Winter 1979). See also the following articles and Critical Dialogue in JUMP CUT on JAWS: Peter Biskind, "Between the Teeth" (No. 9, October-December 1975); Dan Rubey, "The Jaws in the Mirror" (No. 10/11, June 1976); Robert Wilson, "JAWS as Submarine Movie" (No. 15, July 1970). JAWS and Spielberg's other films will be discussed in more detail in the forthcoming book *Politics and Ideology in Contemporary American Film* by Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan. This article is indebted to work done with Ryan on the ideologies of contemporary film.

[2.](#) POLTERGEIST is directed by Tobe Hooper while Spielberg is credited as producer and one of the writers. Spielberg claims that the story idea was his. The film concludes with, "A Steven Spielberg Film." Alleged tensions arose between Hooper and Spielberg. There is debate over whose film it really is — as if a collective enterprise "belonged" to one person. In fact, the film offers an amalgam of the cinematic styles and philosophies of Hooper and Spielberg. The film exhibits Hooper's flair for the suspenseful, odd, and horrific and Spielberg's affection for the middle-class, fuzzy-minded occultism, and nose for the market. In any

case, there are enough Spielbergian elements in it to justify analysis of the film in terms of Spielberg's ideological problematic.

[3.](#) On the problematics and ideological contradictions in contemporary horror films, see the studies collected in Andrew Britton, Richard Kippe, Tony Williams, and Robin Wood, *American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film* (Toronto: Festival of Festivals Publication, 1979) and the studies in Kellner-Ryan (forthcoming).

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Reds on *Reds*

by John Hess and Chuck Kleinhans

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We often find ourselves intrigued with the variety of reviews of some popular films, and we have a special interest in the divergent range of left reviews. If nothing else, a comparison of Movement press response to REDS shows that radical critics have provided no single radical analysis of the film, but rather an extreme diversity. REDS offered a provocative example for investigation. Because it dealt with the left, had a good box office, and received the critical attention of New York critics, Directors Guild, and Academy Awards, the left press ran many reviews and letters.

In an article in *Working Papers* on the left press' reception of REDS, Linda Bamber accounts for the large, intense critical response by referring to "the scarcity of cultural self-images available to intellectual leftists, who are by definition outsiders to the dominant culture." Because of our thirst for dynamic self-images within the dominant culture, we respond, she says, to "Beatty's obviously sincere attempt to contribute to a cultural mythology of the left..."

We couldn't resist collecting reviews of the film once we found out that Ronald Reagan liked it (though he wished for a happy ending, according to the *New York Times*) and that the Communist Party, USA, editorially praised REDS and urged its supporters to see the film. In the film's own spirit, we have decided to present our own set of "witnesses." By way of comparison, we included a sprinkling of comments from the dominant press to show some recurrent similarities and differences in the way critics interpreted and evaluated REDS. For example, while everyone saw REDS as a love story mixed with political events which were meant to stir the audience, people reacted differently to its being that kind of romantic-political mixture.

### ROMANCE

"I'm a romantic. I believe in moments when life shivers with a wild intensity. I believe that Moscow snow just has to be whiter than starlight and that there's something exquisite and chilling about red flags

billowing above all that white. I believe art and joy, rebelliousness and pathos are resources as valuable as labor and capital ... I loved the movie REDS. It inspired just the enthusiasm and caring that emerges from the best writing of Bryant and Reed ... The lives of Louise Bryant and John Reed are inspiring to me; their commitment and courage were of mythic dimensions. We need legends from our radical past, people to serve as models from whose failures and victories we can learn. I hope artists and writers will continue to weave tales from that history, for it is a story rich in drama and romance.” — Jack Manno, *Peace Newsletter*, publication of the broad-based Syracuse Peace Council

“It is first of all a romance — staple of all themes — and the years of political turmoil in which the story unfolds are meant to cast the romance into epic proportions. Otherwise, everything is ordinary: two people run after a Meaning in a chaotic world, going through the tensions that a couple who have definite ideas about what they should be (going] through, and trying to resolve the conflict between the demands of private life and the demands of the world. In the end, love triumphs and brings its poignancy. Tragedy comes in the shape of death. Are we summarizing REDS or Seagal's [sic] LOVE STORY? No matter, plot-wise, there is not that much difference.” — N.R., *Modern Times*, bulletin of the Hawaii Union of Socialists

“[Beatty's] gone and made a *movie*, a very long and satisfying romance wherein Reed's devotion to godless communism provides the most exotic of backgrounds for an old-fashioned love story that few moviegoers will have any difficulty recognizing or embracing ... Beatty had the intuition to see beyond the politics, to realize, first of all, how a patina of distance and romance would safely neutralize Reed's beliefs until he seems no more threatening than a Rotarian ...” — Kenneth Turan, *California*, a glossy regional magazine

“Jack has his ideals; she has him. When, near the end, the two meet up for the last time in a train station in Moscow, REDS allows us to discover — and feel — what is ultimately more important.” — Lawrence O'Toole, *MacLean's*, the Canadian newsweekly

“The picture glorifies Reed, and the picture prevails, the motion picture, Romance, Hollywood, True Love, True Confessions ... she's sorry now that she left him.” — Barbara Halpern Martineau, *Broadside*, a Canadian feminist newspaper

“This is a fascinating, extraordinary film for two reasons: first, for its beauty and political content; second, who really is this movie star Warren Beatty, and why did he make this daring, courageous pro-revolutionary film?” — Lester Cole, *People's World*, the West Coast Communist Party newspaper (Cole was one of the jailed and blacklisted Hollywood Ten)

“Hollywood playboy Warren Beatty sees something of himself in John Reed: the unfulfilled artist. But Beatty lacks spine, sees women as transitory warm flesh, and thus tries to make the primary thing in John

Reed's life his love with Louise Bryant ... Thus we get an otherwise hackneyed love story which would be simply trite without the backdrop of radicalism and revolution.” — A San Diego comrade, *Challenge/Desafio*, newspaper of the Progressive Labor Party, an Old Left sect

“To some extent there is an element of romance involved. When I read Vivian Gornick's *Romance of American Communism*, for instance, I think of how people really wanted to devote their lives passionately to a cause and get involved with it. Somehow the image that Beatty creates is some of what hooked me into politics. A lot of that sort of political life in the sixties involved both personal and political gratification. So the fact that Beatty decided to try to sell the left to the U.S. people, and do it by figuring out what it was that had hooked him onto it, was a good decision ... A great deal of it has to do with comradeship, adventure, and so on. That is certainly a lot of the appeal of it for me — that you give your life to it; and history is not under your control.” — Kate Ellis, in a transcribed discussion with others in *Socialist Review*, the reform socialist journal

## HISTORY AND IMAGE

Most of the left discussion of REDS concerned the film's portrayal of history, often comparing REDS with DR. ZHIVAGO. No one discussed the nature of historical drama or compared the film to other dramatic historical left films such as BATTLE OF ALGIERS or 1900, or socialist films such as OCTOBER or LUCIA.

“Politically perhaps the most significant thing about REDS is that it presents a powerful refutation of the anti-communist propaganda myth that the Russian revolution was a coup perpetrated behind the backs of the Russian people by a handful of Bolshevik plotters. REDS offers marvelous street scenes of Petrograd during the days when the Bolsheviks won political power — the ten days that shook the world. We see the indispensable ingredient of authentic revolution — the masses of people intervening decisively in the historical process.” — Harry Ring, *The Militant*, newspaper of the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party

“At first, as we encounter soldiers and peasants standing at railroad stations, we get a sense of the pregnancy of the revolution. The Russian masses' yearning for peace has become a material force, and only the Bolsheviks have translated it into a political program. This motion soon climaxes in organized insurrection and undoubtedly all but the most politically stony-hearted will find themselves thrilling to the scenes when a martial rendering of the Internationals orchestrates gal a mass workers' demonstration through the streets of Petrograd, culminating in the storming of the Winter Palace. For one magic moment, we are all revolutionaries!” — Irwin Silber, *Line of March*, Marxist-Leninist journal

“... the anti-capitalist, pro-Communist poison — cleverly dispensed by talented professionals, working with a fast-moving, literate script-drips

off the silver screen. 'Property is Theft,' proclaims a note pinned to the front door of the protagonist's apartment in Greenwich Village ... The overthrow of the moderate Kerensky Government in Moscow by the Bolsheviks in October 1918 ... was apparently a spontaneous revolt of the masses, rather than a Communist conspiracy." — Robert M. Bleiberg, *Barrons*, the right-wing business newspaper

"The political discussions about socialism, communism and anarchism, which were clearly the questions of the day, are handled cynically, basically divorced from the class struggle. One exception is when Reed was in Petrograd: at a mass meeting on what sort of support could be expected from the international working class for the revolution, Reed spoke for the U.S. workers, saying that they were looking to the Russian masses for the example to seize power from the capitalists." — A Detroit Comrade, *Challenge*

"... The plot turns into a winsome case of revolution-as-aphrodisiac as Reed and Bryant, working as (what else but) comrades, discover they're still sweet on each other. One scene is especially memorable: after Reed makes a rousing speech to a hall full of burly workers, his audience, as burly folk are wont to do, rush forward and overwhelm him with hearty congratulations. Reed suddenly looks up and favors Bryant with the most pleasingly self-deprecating of shrugs. It's pure movie corn, a page from a Harlequin novel for intellectuals, but it is as irresistible to us as it is to her." — Turan, *California*

"REDS tries to demonstrate that Reed's romantic attachment to the revolution has distorted his sense of reality. The point is established in a scene at a workers' rally. Tension is in the air. The revolution is imminent. The debate over whether or not to seize power is raging. Enthusiasm for the revolutionary moment is building lip in the crowd when Reed is suddenly propelled to the platform. The 'American comrade' is asked to speak. Reed responds with a passionate — but to a contemporary audience, completely absurd — pronouncement that the workers in the U.S. are themselves chomping at the bit of revolution and are ready to join their Russian brothers as soon as the signal is sent from Petrograd. The crowd thunders its approval. By itself the incident can be explained as an excess of the movement. But in the context of the film — and in view of all that follows — it subtly establishes that Reed's political judgments are not to be trusted. After all, love is blind, and we do not think less of the lover for this universal weakness. To underscore the film's view that Reed's attachment to the revolution is composed more of romance than perceptiveness, the incident culminates in the sexual reunion of Reed and Bryant, likewise tumultuously orchestrated by the *Internationale*." — Silber, *Line of March*

"[Beatty] still found enough artistic detachment to make his Reed into a flawed, fascinating enigma instead of a boring archetypal hero. I liked this movie. I felt a real fondness for it. It is quite a subject to spring on the capitalist Hollywood movie system, and maybe only Beatty could have raised \$35 million to make a movie about a man who hated

millionaires. I notice, here at the end of the credits, a wonderful line that reads: 'Copyright MCMLXXXI *Barclay's Mercantile Industrial Finance Limited.*' John Reed would have loved that." — Roger Ebert, *Sun-Times*, the daily Chicago newspaper

"When REDS got an R rating, Beatty appealed that decision, arguing that, despite the strong language, his movie reclaimed an era of American history that every schoolchild should see. The movie was subsequently given a PG, and as exhibitors left the appeals hearing, they approached Beatty individually and said they were proud to be showing the picture." — David Thompson, *California*

"Beatty is clearly fascinated by the tension in Reed between the artist-rebel and the revolutionary who decides for the disciplined vanguard party against his temperament ... REDS is something of an anti-ZHIVAGO whose hero resolves his conflict between private and public life with an ever deepening political commitment. Thus many reviewers like the movie despite its political background. We like REDS because of it." — Pat Kincaid, *Worker's Vanguard*, newspaper of the left-Trotskyist Spartacist League

"I'd like to speculate that possibly the film's deepest sympathy lies in the revolt against the bourgeoisie, not as a political revolt, but as a bohemian one ... Beatty had been obsessed with Reed's story for fifteen years, and it can't be for the revolutionary politics. It has to be for the nature of the man, Reed, the nature of that kind of romanticism, the nature of that notion of individuality, that spontaneity." — Leonard Quart, *Socialist Review*

"And even if the movie takes care to say that revolution would not work in America, there has never been a major motion picture that makes a communist so attractive." — Thompson, *California*

"It's not clear from the narrative that anything has been worthwhile. It is rather as though, if the revolution fails, all has, indeed, been lost." — E. Ann Kaplan, *Socialist Review*

## SIGNIFYING ABSENCES

While any collection of excerpts may trivialize the arguments, as we found reviews of REDS with distinctly different opinions and compared them, we realized that although in some cases the reviewers' politics obviously correlated with their interpretation, in fact the two did not always mesh. Perhaps we could have more systematically found such correlations by comparing the publication's political line and its reviews (maybe starting with the two largest left newspapers not dealt with here — the independent radical *Guardian* and the social democrat *In These Times*). As we continued collecting reviews, we found distinct differences in what people picked up on in the film, what they thought worked or didn't work, and what they thought the film left out.

"The movie never succeeds in convincing us that the feuds between the

American socialist parties were much more than personality conflicts and ego-bruising, so audiences can hardly be expected to care which faction is "the" American party of the left." — Ebert, *Sun-Times*

"The film deals with subject matter virtually unknown to the U.S. public. The viewing audience is exposed to ideas about party-building, Comintern strategy, the conflict between anarchism and Bolshevism, and the movement in the United States against World War I ... Back in the U.S., Reed becomes a full-time activist in the Socialist Party. This is one of the most interesting parts of the film. The left-wing of the party splits off ..." — M.V., *Modern Times*

"For members of the audience not informed about the events, it must be particularly difficult to comprehend the condensed and sometimes simplistic depiction of the split in the Socialist Party, and the two communist parties that emerged from the split. This is so even though the film stays quite close to what actually happened." — Ring, *The Militant*

"The political arguments, though condensed, are powerful, as Beatty has his hero answer the best arguments of his opponents." — Kincaid, *Worker's Vanguard*

"Reed's role in U.S. communist politics reveals nothing so much as the inconsequential squabbling characteristic of the left, its total irrelevancy to U.S. life, and its complete dependence on Moscow." — Silber, *Line of March*

"The film showed Reed's group as the dominant left-wing group in the Socialist Party. In fact it was a small minority within the left wing of the SP. Had his group waited one more day and met with the majority left-wing members of the SP at the founding convention of the CP, no such split would have occurred. None of the facts clutter the film. The Comintern is accurately shown directing both parties to suspend any differences and merge." — David E. Massette, *People's World*

"During this we see him in a discussion with Emma Goldman, the anarchist-to-the-end, a refugee, hating Moscow and the Revolution. Patiently (and beautifully played by Beatty) he explains simply what she cannot accept, about struggle and growth." — Cole, *People's World*

"Reed never told Goldman to stick with the failing revolution. "Otherwise what does your whole life mean?" — these words are taken, significantly, from the closing speech of the renegade Bolshevik Nikolai Bukarin, explaining at his 1938 trial his confession that he conspired with Trotsky against the U.S.S.R." — A New Jersey Comrade, *Challenge*

"But the film is more than superficial — at the critical junctures it makes the wrong political choices. Incredibly, we hardly see a single capitalist during the whole movie, and the real horrors of capitalism — the wars, the racist lynchings, the poverty, the cultural and moral bankruptcy — are never vividly exposed. In contrast, the main villains of REDS turn



out to be the reds themselves.” — Eric Michaelson and Mark Rosenbaum, *Unity*, Paper of the U.S. League of Revolutionary Struggle (M-L)

“One weakness of the film REDS is the near absence of the working class, except for a few brief scenes. Without them there is little understanding of the essential motivation of Reed's life. Reed and Louise Bryant did not go to Russia just because it was a ‘good story.’” — Chuck Idelson and Michael Stephens, *People's World*

“... I would like to reflect what I think should be the obligation and requirements of film reviewing, for a working class newspaper and an unusually large working class conscious audience. Does its overall reality, despite its weaknesses, provide humanism in its presentation, convey some semblance of the class struggle? Does the producer serve the interests of peace and justice? It is necessary to see REDS in the light of the artistic honesty of Warren Beatty, and whether he sincerely and truthfully produced a work of art. That this artistic endeavor comes at a time when nuclear war and anti-Soviet, anti-Socialist, anti-Communist hysteria is being peddled by all the media, lifts his work into the realm of art. Because it portrays the life of a Communist, John Reed; uses real live Communists as 'witnesses'; debunks 64 years of anti-Sovietism and captures the fervor of the most exquisite moment of history; makes a hero out of a Communist, and does this all with originality, imagery and beauty, this is art.” — Jerry Atinsky, *People's World*

## LOUISE BRYANT

After REDS it presumably will be impossible for leftists to dismiss Bryant as simply a nameless "girlfriend" (as Lee Baxandall did in a 1968 article). But if Bryant gets inserted back into history by way of a movie, this has raised a number of questions about the historical woman (Was her writing inferior? Was she flaky, as Emma Goldman claimed?) as well as about Diane Keaton's star image ("Annie Hall joins the revolution"), and the character's narrative function as a woman who sacrifices herself for a man.

“At the same time there is a constant 'distracting' from the political issues through the focus on Louise. For instance, in the scene in Louise's studio, shortly after she and Reed have met, Reed's political ideas are garbled in order to rush us through the question of whether or not they will go to bed. I was really into what Reed had to say, but obviously, from the way the scene was cut, one was not meant to hear. The whole scene is geared toward the sexual relationship. Again, in the important scene where Reed and his group are trying to take their legitimate seats in the Socialist Party Convention, the camera keeps cutting to Louise's emotional reactions, pulling us constantly back to her personal feelings and away from the politics.” — Kaplan, *Socialist Review*

“The first time I saw REDS I was excited by the scene where, as Reed quarrels with the leader of another leftist splinter group, there is a recurrent close up of Louise Bryant looking shocked, and she soon

leaves the meeting. In the next scene she tells Reed how idiotic is for two small groups, neither of them representative of the American working class, to fight in this way; that Reed's best talents are as a writer, not as an organizer; that he should stay home and write, not go to Russia again to claim recognition for his group. Her argument is compelling, and I was delighted to see the emphasis given her by the film. I was puzzled when the film proceeded to set up Reed as a hero in the face of all comers. Seeing REDS again, I realized how much of a setup it is. In the argument scene, Bryant/Keaton is dressed in a housecoat. She's disheveled, almost hysterical, begging Reed not to go, playing the role of possessive, irrational wife she has played before. Read/Beatty is immaculate in suit and white shirt, composed, determined, unwavering in his obsession." — Martineau, *Broadside*

"Louise Bryant didn't need Jack Reed to inform her of free sex. She had been doing it, unabashedly in public, since she was a sophomore at the University of Oregon." — Laura Cottingham, *Soho News*, the NYC hip newsweekly

"There is something unpleasant about the characterization of a liberated woman as, first of all, being sexually free. One may ask why, whenever one talks about liberation in relation to men, it is immediately equated with political or economic freedom whereas whenever the subject is raised in connection with women, the expected reply is: 'I'd like to see you with your pants off, Mr. Reed.'" — N.R., *Modern Times*

"Some people have criticized the portrayal of Bryant because historically she handled the whole issue of monogamy and sexual freedom with a great deal more aplomb than is presented in the movie. I myself find it very hard to identify with the idea of having multiple relationships and simply moving on from one to the next without any difficulty. Many women would have difficulty in relation to that kind of character." — Ellis, *Socialist Review*

"... his wife Louise Bryant, a self-indulgent petite-bourgeoise who is constantly ridiculing Reed and trying to hold him back .... He is shown engrossed in his personal troubles with his wife, reminiscing about the past, while the streets are filled with red soldiers and workers, jubilantly defending the revolution." — A Detroit Comrade, *Challenge*

"It seems that in order to be independent, she has to be kind of querulous and she has to say the usual feminist thing, 'You're not giving me support for what I'm trying to do.' But that plugs into something that's around in American culture already. Similarly there's that whole thing with the cooking where he's spilling things all over the place; he's the kind of guy who's read 'The Politics of Housework' and is giving it a try, so to speak." — Ellis, *Socialist Review*

"Beatty as Reed and Keaton as Bryant seem like spoiled adolescents playing with avant-garde radicalism rather than committed revolutionaries. The sexual politics are also troubling. They speak of free love, but the audience laughs at their naiveté and doesn't believe they

mean it. With good reason: Beatty/Reed and Keaton/Bryant speak of non-monogamy but fight over jealousies and lovers ... not honestly trying to understand how they feel and why it is so difficult to be non-monogamous ..." — M. May, *Modern Times*

"Each is the other's cross to bear, without which neither would want to live. REDS suggests that the mystery of love resides in its inherent masochism." — O'Toole, *MacLean's*

"[Lovers for awhile] in the late seventies, Diane Keaton and Beatty ... drifted apart during the making of REDS as Beatty lost sight of everything except the film (Reed and Bryant's marriage is constantly jeopardized by his passionate involvement with the radical cause)." — Thompson, *California*

"Early in his sickness I asked him to promise me that he would rest before going home since it only meant going to prison. I felt prison would be too much for him. I remember he looked at me in a strange way and said, 'My dear little Honey, I would do anything I could for you, but don't ask me to be a coward.' I had not meant it so. I felt so hurt that I burst into tears and said he could go and I would go with him anywhere by the next train, to any death, or any suffering. He smiled so happily then." — Louise Bryant, letter to Max Eastman

"The appellation Red, long a term of abuse for anyone suspected of harbouring critical views about the status quo, has a different sense for me than its usual meaning of Left with a capital L, Ladies-make-the-coffee-and-men-make-politics sort of slant. In the movie REDS, there's a scene where producer-director-star Warren Beatty ... heads for the toilet in a crowded jail cell filled with other activists and more 'common' outlaws. Beatty's face expresses pain and bewilderment; an old geezer looks over his shoulder; we see a close up of the toilet bowl; then the old geezer says, 'This one even pisses red.' Laughter. Meaning: in his tireless crusade for justice, John Reed is about to lose a kidney. But he will persevere, in spite of government persecution, dissension in the left, and desertion by his wife because of his infidelity. I am reminded of a T-shirt I've coveted on other women. It has a beautiful batik design of red on purple, and lettering which says: 'I am Woman. I can bleed for days and not die.' When Louise Bryant, Reed's colleague, lover, wife, is trekking through Finland on skis trying to find Reed and get him out of prison (an episode almost entirely fictionalized by the film and milked for its romantic interest), I wondered what she did when she got her period. The film didn't enlighten me." — Martineau, *Broadside*

## THE WITNESSES

*American Film* identified all the interviewees, but after everyone had a chance to guess.

"For the best part of two years, he and his cinematographer, Vittorio Storaro (1900 and APOCALYPSE NOW) collected the memories of other veterans of the period — so many of them dead before the movie

opened. Thirty-two witnesses appear in the picture, but Beatty filmed many more — some interviews as long as two hours. This material is a documentary treasure that any archive would envy.” — Thompson, *California*

“... ‘witnesses’ ... who were contemporaries of Reed and Bryant, reminisce about them, often vaguely ... These old, wrinkled, ‘real’ people are like ghosts recalled from the past, speaking with authority about the texture of their times, their voice-overs become a narrative device, keeping the complex story lucid throughout. They can't tell us much about Reed and Bryant, other than ‘they were a couple,’ so it is left to Beatty to imaginatively create their private world.” — O'Toole, *MacLean's*

But whether or not by design — nothing in this crafted, crafty film happens by accident — the men and women speaking are never identified (and, toward the end, become mere voice-overs). The result is deliberately confusing, not to say obfuscatory, and it succeeds in putting some good people in a very poor light. Hamilton Fish apparently spent a lifetime fighting Reds without ever learning how to produce the word ‘Communist,’ while the oldsters — who in their salad days and long afterward were well worth listening to — come off as doddering and unsure.” — Beliberg, *Barron's*

“These witnesses ... are so uniformly captivating that Beatty's decision not to identify them while they are on screen is terribly frustrating. Despite this their presence serves a double purpose: they pique our interest by grounding the film in an engaging historical reality, and, more cleverly, because their recollections are often sketchy they point up the tenuousness and uncertainty of history, in effect — excusing Beatty in advance for the minor liberties he has taken with the facts.” — Turan, *California*

“They are narrators, and vocally in close-ups, as they remember the times being shown visually, they comment. A fascinating technique to facilitate the movement of time, and personal remembrances ...” — Cole, *People's World*

“Beatty's shrewd and artistically brilliant use of a “chorus” of aged real-life “witnesses” also acts to lend distance from the political present. The various speakers are contradictory ... The overall effect is to fix the events in a distant, dimly if at all remembered past.” — Kincaid, *Worker's Vanguard*

“Beatty also uses the brilliant device of interrupting his story with interviews with real ‘witnesses,’ still alive today ... The effect, as in a Brecht play, is to prevent the audience from getting too involved in the film as fantasy — reminding them. This is the story of real people.” — Michaelson and Rosenbaum, *Unity*

“To say that it is a ‘distanciation’ device would be to give it too grand a name, but there's a way in which you are made aware that you're

watching a construction, because here are these historical figures who lived in the period, and knew the people; I thought it was effective in countering some of the distortions in the film. We realize that 'truth' is hard to come by. — Kaplan, *Socialist Review*

## ZINOVIEV

Perhaps the most symptomatic element of the REDS reviews was the critics' repeated return to the question: Who was Zinoviev?

"In Moscow Reed comes into direct conflict with the leader of the Comintern, Zinoviev, a rigid authoritarian, who gives orders, and will not brook interference. (Zinoviev was purged from the Party 15 years later.) — Cole, *People's World*

"Are the major characters in the movie Bill Haywood, communists and socialists? No. They are: ... Grigory Zinoviev, a Bolshevik who opposed the party's decision to begin armed insurrection (Lenin called him a scab for that), who in 1925 organized the Trotskyist "New Opposition" and was expelled from the party in 1934 (Zinoviev is played by the well-known Polish anticommunist writer Jerzy Kozinski, a lover of U.S. imperialism); ..." — A Detroit Comrade, *Challenge*

"It is with the figure of Zinoviev, sharply insisting on the party's monopoly on truth, that Beatty does make some concessions to anticommunist stereotype. Yet as Reed's desire to return home by the holidays is portrayed in the film, in the midst of the Russian Civil War, we do not find Zinoviev's sharp and angry objections to this powerful propagandist's taking off to be out of line." — Kincaid, *Worker's Vanguard*

"Zinoviev was a leading member of the Bolshevik Party and the Communist International. In the 1930s he and many others were framed up by Stalin and executed as 'Nazi agents.' In one scene, Zinoviev argues with Reed, who wants to return home, assertedly because of a personal commitment he made to Louise Bryant. Zinoviev argues, in a seemingly heartless way, that Reed is urgently needed in Moscow for the important political work he is doing. While the actor who plays Zinoviev delivers the lines in a harsh, alienating way, what Zinoviev is portrayed as telling Reed is not unreasonable. You can always return to your personal responsibilities, Zinoviev says, but never to this moment in history." — Ring, *The Militant*

"The characterization of Soviet Communist Zinoviev as a Marxist Darth Vader, giving ominous speeches to John Reed about how he must choose between his family and revolution, only serves to frighten the audience. In fact, all successful revolutions have built on people's love of their families and their willingness to make sacrifices precisely to make a better world for their children." — Michaelson and Rosenbaum, *Unity*

My identification is always with the Reed character, of course, as opposed to Zinoviev. Zinoviev and Radek seem to be relatively accurate

portraits. Stalin ultimately killed them in an interesting historical twist; those great bureaucrats were ultimately murdered as Trotskyist and Bukharinite oppositions.” — Quart, *Socialist Review*

“Zinoviev becomes the film's cynical example of a party leader: opportunist, unfeeling, manipulating and dogmatic — the Hollywood-capitalist image of a good communist. The historical fact is that Zinoviev was a renegade: when he translated Reed's speech to the Oriental Congress, he changed the original words 'class war' to 'jihad' — holy war. That was the traitor's political idea, not the idea of the Third International. Reed attacked Zinoviev for his treachery, though the film portrayal of this is primarily individualistic — don't change anything that I write — not political.” — A Detroit Comrade, *Challenge*

“The whole Baku Conference is falsified. The racist portrayal of the Babel of voices is taken from *The Lost Revolutionary* by Richard O'Connor and Dale Walker (O'Connor wrote the 'Bat Masterson' TV series of 20 years ago, which made a hero of a homicidal pimp), who got it in turn from Robert Dunn, a U.S. government spy who never got nearer the conference than Constantinople and didn't write until 1959. Zinoviev's speech (which called for, among other things, a 'holy war against robbers and oppressors') is cynically portrayed as a translation of Reed's; in fact, Reed's own speech was about American workers' exploitation. Reed never told Zinoviev, 'Don't rewrite what I write!' This is put in to balance the similar scene at the beginning of the film with Grant Hovey, editor of the bourgeois *Metropolitan* magazine.” — A New Jersey Comrade, *Challenge*

“The scene is a racist slander, trying to build up pro-war hysteria against Arabs and Iranians ... The movie ... slanders Zinoviev. Zinoviev and Reed actually put forward the same line at the Congress: workers and peasants in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East should reject alliances with the local bosses and should fight for socialist soviets on the Russian model. This was a very advanced line, which the Communist International later retreated from (at Lenin's insistence). I think that in this case they were to the left of Lenin and they had a better line ... We shouldn't be so quick to assume that the communist movement in the past was infected by bad ideas like nationalism. The problem was Beatty's lies, not Zinoviev's.” — A Reader, *Challenge*

“REDS is accurate in pointing out the demagogic aspects of the Baku Congress of Peoples of the East in 1920. Zinoviev did indeed call for an Islamic 'jihad' (holy war). This call for religious holy war was an aberration of Communist International (Comintern) policy toward the colonial regions. Surely Beatty was reflecting on Khomeini's Iran as many reformist organizations hailed Khomeini's mullah 'jihad' in part on the authority of the Baku Congress. But Reed was right ...” — Kincaid, *Worker's Vanguard*

“There is even less basis in fact for the scene in which Reed angrily assails Zinoviev for making a change in translation of Reed's speech at the Baku conference ... Actually Reed, along with numerous others of

the invited speakers, never got to make his speech at Baku. He did give a very brief greeting, but his speech was simply included in the official proceedings of the conference. Neither his greetings nor his speech ... include the phrase 'class war' or 'holy war.'" — Ring, *The Militant*

"When Reed discovers what has occurred, he engages Zinoviev in a shouting match — a replay actually of an earlier scene in which a bourgeois editor has altered Reed's copy without permission. While Zinoviev ridicules Reed's 'individualism' and justifies the change on the grounds of political expediency, Reed argues that dissent is the essence of revolution. Taken as a unity — as indeed they must be — the two scenes register REDS' essential message: revolution is the struggle against authority in general and there is little distinction between the tyranny of capitalist wealth and the autocracy of communist power. In fact, if anything, the latter is more absolute and, therefore, more oppressive. The communists are such cynical manipulators, in fact, that they will readily abandon their own well-known atheism and play into religious sentiments in seeking immediate advantages."

"It protects itself from going overboard politically; it finally ends with a level of disenchantment with the revolution. It does ask questions about political commitment yet it does not put down political commitment, because Reed is an extremely attractive figure. It asks a number of questions about the nature of political commitment — the self-destructive quality, the level of betrayal which Goldman brings out, that is the betrayal of one's ideals when revolution takes form — questions to me that are real." — Quart, *Socialist Review*

#### LEFT FILM ANALYSIS

Based on our sampling it seems accurate to say that most left film discussion leaves a lot to be desired. By and large it falls into the familiar pattern of claiming the film has a single universal meaning, which the critic has discovered through superior political and cinematic acumen. By virtue of embracing Scientific Socialism, the critic has a pipeline to Truth. The critic declares an interpretation and "proves" it through a variety of non-analytical, rhetorical devices. For example, the reviewers introduce contradictory aspects of Warren Beatty's star image to buttress whatever argument is at hand: dissolute playboy or Hollywood left-liberal.

Such a strategy leaves little room for difference, for diverging views, for contradiction. It tends to leave a lot of room for inflating the critic's ego, for shooting from the hip, and for collapsing personal response into political analysis: I liked it, therefore it's politically correct, or vice versa. Such dogmatism from the reviewer tends to provoke an equally dogmatic response from the readers (This reviewer is full of shit!) or else humiliation (Gee, I didn't see that, I guess I'm really stupid). An alternative to slug-it-out dogmatism, Barbara Halpern Martineau's review, asserts a feminist norm to interrogate the film's patriarchal form and content. In the larger context of patriarchal film critical discourse, such a strategy becomes sly, witty and subversive.

As editors, we face the same problems in considering reviews for JUMP CUT. Because the dominant forms of journalistic reviewing are built on assumptions of imminent meaning and the critic as privileged perceiver, we often find left film reviewers repeating the same pattern. Yet, we'd argue, that's just not enough for an adequate Marxist analysis, for it misses an essential prior question: What is the nature and effect of cinema as an institution? As long as left film reviewers assume that it's more important to have the correct line on Zinoviev than to understand how a film functions in reproducing ideology, left cultural politics will be fundamentally reactionary and mystifying — a mirror of the right wing's cultural critiques.

“A great piece of Communist propaganda, with a cast of thousands, brought to your neighborhood screen by Paramount Pictures a ‘Gulf + Western company.’” — Blieberg, *Barron's*

“The movie is directed primarily towards intellectuals and students who would be attracted to revolution in this period of developing war and fascism. The similarities of the present period and the time in which Reed developed his communist consciousness are great and the ruling class is out to create cynicism among this section of the population.” — A Detroit Comrade, *Challenge*

While few left film critics veered so far into conspiracy theories, most saw REDS as propagating a simple message. It was rare to find anyone trying to discuss the film's diverse appeal.

“It has, as it were, something for everyone: A Revolution for the Left, disillusionment for the Right, continued idealism for the romantic and for the emotional, a love that spans continents and oceans.” — N.R., *Modern Times*

We think a review should be a site of investigation, a way to provoke thought and educate readers about the world and culture around them. But the left discussions of REDS showed virtually no interest in or awareness of such basic questions as these: How did the general audience, unschooled in left debates, relate to the film? How did REDS function as entertainment? How do the star images of Keaton and Beatty affect viewers' perception of the film? What does the film convey about history and the nature of personal and political change, and how does it use images to do so? How does the film use its romanticism and dramatization of events and people?

The left seems to have little awareness of the contradictory forces at work in a major Hollywood film — the influence of finance and the market, the force of genre and narrative, the collective production process, and divergent audience responses. Yet without more complete and sophisticated analyses, critics can offer only fundamentally idiosyncratic and subjective judgments. The left does not settle for that in essays on economics, the state, and labor unions. How much longer will it accept subjective impressions as the basis for evaluating



## Hollywood?

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### *The Verdict* Guilty as charged

by Phyllis Deutsch

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There's a lot wrong with *THE VERDICT*, the latest Paul Newman vehicle that (according to many critics) assures him an academy award next spring. The movie concerns a malpractice case. Two eminent physicians at the well respected St. Catherine's Hospital in Boston have apparently incorrectly administered anesthetic to a pregnant woman whose brain died as a result — leaving her a vegetable. St. Catherine's is a Catholic hospital, and the archdiocese wants the incident hushed up. The victim's sister applies to Frank Galvin (Newman), a hard-drinking, ambulance-chasing attorney, to take the case. Galvin is also an ex-liberal who lost his faith after being jailed unfairly on a jury-tampering charge. Frank the Faithless senses a shot at redemption. He decides, against the wishes of his clients, to try the case in court rather than accept a fat insurance payoff from the defendant.

Galvin is a fine zealot but a lousy lawyer. The defendants pay off his best witness. He forgets to tell his clients that he's decided to take their case to court. He lies continually in his single-minded quest for truth. He's inept at jury selection. He alienates potential witnesses by screaming at them and disbelieves the ones he manages to obtain. Abrasive and insensitive, Galvin treats everyone with contempt except his good-guy sidekick, Mickey (Jack Warden). He's not a lawyer — or a man — anyone could like, much less trust, but he's the holiday season hero. What's going on?

Clearly, the white-knight-against-the-system formula retains its mass appeal. But it's a strain to keep the formula intact in this film because the hero is in turn brash, self-serving, and childish (Galvin is given to tantrums when things don't go his way). To make their myth work, director Sidney Lumet and scriptwriter David Mamet have a foolproof plan. They play their dubious Christ off against a cast of characters considerably worse than he is. In a world that stinks from top to bottom, Galvin comes off smelling like a rose.

At the top, the ruling class fares miserably. The doctors, lawyers, and priests couldn't be sleazier. Milo O'Shea as a corrupt judge is usually eating something drippy (fried eggs, thick soup). James Mason as the defendant attorney Conccannon oozes condescension, never loses his cool, and is served tea by a black man. Both O'Shea and Mason have foreign accents; in fact, all major players in the film have accents. Except Newman, of course, who therefore comes across as the only real American in the crowd. Indeed, it seems he is the only real man in Boston. His upper-crust opposition is feminized by accent, appearance, and mannerism. This is especially evident in the depiction of men of the cloth: a couple of altar boys look like fresh-faced young girls. But Calvin, gravel-voiced and abrupt, is a man for all seasons.

The film goes still further in its struggle to keep the white knight on his charger. While Calvin beats the upper class by dint of greater virility, he gets the dispossessed — blacks, working class people, women — on the strength of his own considerable credentials. He's white, good looking, well educated, male. He's not rich anymore, but he sure used to be. This little twist signals the hypocrisy at the movie's core. The film's attitude toward the people it purports to help is a queasy mixture of contempt and misapprehension. In *THE VERDICT*, the good guys are just as awful as the bad guys.

There is one black person in the film: a doctor who has come to testify for Calvin. When Conccannon hears that Calvin's only witness is a black man, he snickers and tells assorted sycophants to "get a black attorney to sit at our table." But the side of right is just as wrong. Mickey refers to the black man as a "witch doctor" because, it seems, he got his degree at a *women's* college and works on staff there. Calvin concurs and sets out to find a more "credible" witness. To make matters worse, the script saddles the black doctor with an additional liability: he has testified at twenty-seven negligence trials. At best, then, the black doctor is a well-meaning but dubious witness. At worst, he's out to make a buck like everyone else.

The working-class characters don't shine either, although the really fine acting in these roles gives the film its few moments of authenticity. Kevin, the victim's brother-in-law, is being transferred to Arizona by his company. He hired Calvin simply to mediate the settlement payoff. When he learns that Calvin turned down the money in favor of a trial, he's furious. It's an interesting scene. Kevin's rage leads to punching Calvin, who, penitent, apologizes for "not informing" Kevin of the change and promises the client he'll win the case. Kevin is shot in close up here and looks ominously large. (In fact, Newman is frequently dwarfed by buildings and characters — clearly all the world is out to get him!) Kevin's plaid lumber jacket and heavy shoes are clumsy beside Calvin's well-tailored suit. The workingman's rage is terrifying compared to Calvin's self-control. Kevin becomes a materialistic brute, incapable of understanding Calvin's quixotic quest for justice. This is despite the fact that Kevin and his wife have spent two years at the comatose woman's bedside, shedding real tears, waiting for her to

awaken. The insurance payoff was their only way out of an interminable nightmare.

Women also get theirs. Galvin has a girlfriend, Laura (Charlotte Rampling), whom he picks up at a bar after delivering some profundities. ("The weak," he explains, "need somebody to protect them.") Laura says little, broods a lot, and sleeps with Galvin. She is so thin that she's a good advertisement for the U.S. soaring anorexia rate. Late in the film we learn that she is a spy for the other side.

When Galvin discovers her betrayal, he punches her (hard) in the mouth. "Let him alone," she says, obviously feeling she got what she deserved. In fact, she was going to confess to Galvin before the KO and tries to talk to him several times after that. But he has decided he will never speak to her again. In the last shot of Laura, she lays on her bed, awash in tears and liquor, a phone receiver at her breast. Galvin, on the receiving end of the call, watches the ringing phone and looks very vindicated. Apparently, real men not only hit women these days, they also don't accept apologies.

As Laura's decline suggests, when women aren't tempting and betraying men, they are absolutely helpless. Laura is not going to pull herself together and punch Galvin back. In fact, semi-comatose on the bed, she recalls Debra Ann Kay, the negligence victim who will spend the rest of her life curled up in a fetal position. Galvin was all Debra Ann had in the way of defense, and this is what he said of her:

"That poor girl put her trust in the hands of two men who took her life ... And the people who should care for her — her doctors, you and me — have been bought off to look the other way."

We are all each other's keepers, but the paternalistic blitz in this line, and in the film, keeps us all safely in our places. The "weak" don't need the Galvins of this world to fight for them. They can fight for themselves and should be encouraged to do so, every minute of every day. Fairy tales, even inconsistent ones like this, are bad for everybody.

Says Mickey to Galvin of the other side, "How do you think they wound up with all that money? From doing good?" Meanwhile, Lumet and company are laughing all the way to the bank.

### *Victor/Victoria* It's "Mary Poppins in drag"

by Mark Bernstein

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Early in *VICTOR/VICTORIA*, the recently (and widely) hailed "sophisticated" comedy, Robert Preston, playing the part of a gay nightclub entertainer in 1930s Paris, puts his stuffed sinuses to bed with the languishing line, "There's nothing more inconvenient than an old queen with a head cold." The audience cracks up.

As Toddy, Preston is the operative character in the movie's plot. He takes in Victoria (Julie Andrews), an unemployed singer, convincing her that he can make her a star by passing her off as a male female impersonator. This he does, much to the distress of a visiting nightclub operator (James Garner), who is attracted to the singer until she reveals herself as a him, at which point he recoils in panic.

The laugh mentioned above comes on the word "queen." It's the laugh that second-rate black comics got ten years ago with lines like, "No man, not 'bad,' bad." Or that second-rate white comics got ten years before that by lacing their language with drug references. It's a "knowing" laugh, one that says, "Oh, we know what that means. We're not square. We're cool."

But as usual there's more here than meets the ear. In short, *VICTOR/VICTORIA* may be the single most meretricious major U.S. comedy ever to receive such totally unmerited praise.

First, the minor problems.

The acting. Julie Andrews can't, never could, and she wanders through the movie projecting not so much an intriguing androgyny as the continuing impression of being "Mary Poppins" in drag. Her sexuality isn't ambivalent, it's nondescript. James Garner, on the other hand, is one of those actors (Dick van Dyke, Alan Alda) who have developed an engaging television persona (Maverick/ Rockford/ Polaroid), only to have it fall apart when transferred to the big screen. For all his shoulders, he simply isn't big enough for moviemaking.

The plot. Garner, of course, redeems himself. After establishing through the adolescent expedient of sneaking into Victoria's bathroom to watch her undress (yes, folks, it's as sophisticated as all that) that Victoria is indeed a she, he decides to woo him/her anyway. What a liberal guy. Well, almost. He does tell Victoria it bothers him to be seen dating a "man." She responds that she has to dress as a man in order to work. Crap. Why doesn't it occur to either of them that as Garner's character is the biggest nightclub owner in Chicago, she can have all the work she wants anytime they have the common sense to leave Paris?

Besides, Victoria says, dressing as a man gives her a freedom she's never before known. Crap II. That freedom consists of having to pitch her voice down in every conversation that takes place out of her bedroom and of having to hide from half the waiters in Paris (who saw her before she converted). The couple's real problem — i.e., that he likes boxing while she prefers opera (or, alternately, that they're both morons), is never addressed. It simply gets dropped in the happy ending.

The language. I doubt that 1930s Parisian homosexuals referred to themselves or their world as "gay," as in "Gay Paree," get it? (Indeed, that joke seems to be the only reason for the Paris setting of the film, which projects an atmosphere vaguely reminiscent of Scranton). Nor is authenticity aided when the gangster bodyguard speaks of his "anxiety attacks" or when Jim and Julie make intense lovers' small talk about what they can "relate to," exchanging pious liberalisms on the subject of sex roles that sound like the most mendacious maunderings of a Psychology Today writer's meandering mind.

If the movie did not go beyond this, it could be written off as simply another cranked-out Hollywood comedy, Blake Edwards variety. The formula is, "Co-star two people so well known that it doesn't matter they can't act, or that the script is ludicrous or that the director can't direct. Rake in the bucks. Repeat as necessary."

The reason it can't be written off — and the reason, face it, folks, that it was instead hailed — is that it "deals" with homosexuality. It is here that the film's deep dishonesty lies.

Every film attempts to establish a dynamic with its audience, asks us to perceive characters and situations in certain ways, even if it's no more than to cheer for the good guys and boo the bad guys. When a film fails to do this, we say, with some disappointment, "I didn't get into it."

The dynamic of VICTOR/VICTORIA revolves around several deeply ingrained attitudes toward sexuality: briefly, the cultural messages that tell men to divorce themselves from any aspect of their psyche/ self/ character that might be termed "feminine" and tell women to divorce themselves from aspects that might be considered "masculine." Overachievers that they are, men generally do a better job of this psychic castration. Indeed, one can make a case that the dominant value in the sexual consciousness of U.S. males is the fear of being perceived by

other men as having homosexual tendencies.

But rather than taking a liberated attitude toward homosexuality, the film's dynamic invites us to project our homophobia onto the characters, laugh at them, evade our fears, and then congratulate ourselves for our broadmindedness.

For example, the Garner character takes "Victor" dancing at a club where all the other couples are male. He is discomforted, and we find it hilarious — how can he be so "uncool"? It's a ridiculing kind of laughter, directed at the kind of "man's man" who may even have made us feel less than adequate. So in one moment, we get revenge, evasion, and self-congratulation.

There was a time when, if a filmmaker was "liberal" and needed a plot device that could spout wisdom at appropriate intervals, the character created may have been an old black man, unlettered, arthritic, but "wise in the ways of the world." Well, fashions change, even if forms don't, and this season's officially designated cute minority in Hollywood is homosexuals.

This is worse than patronizing. Because, fifty years ago, what old black men or homosexual entertainers could have told us about was survival, retaining in severely circumscribed circumstances a certain trace of dignity. Survival may be prerequisite to wisdom but is hardly its substitute. By giving such characters "wisdom," however, we evade our own social guilt. It's like:

"Sure, guys, we dumped all over you, but don't you see, you got wisdom in consequence. Frankly, I think you ought to thank us. I mean, where in hell would Jesus be today if there hadn't been somebody around to nail him up? You're not going to thank us? Well picky, picky, picky."

Homophobia is a cultural value strongly fringed with violence, and Blake Edwards is clever enough to give that violence some vicarious outlet. Twice Julie Andrews punches out the character who, as Toddy's original homosexual lover, is established as the "bad guy" homosexual, our crimping stereotype. The audience cheers. Late in the film, Victoria decides to reveal herself as a woman to Garner's former moll (a character drawn with utter contempt for women). She drags the latter into a bedroom and starts aggressively to undress. The latter fears, not unnaturally given the way the scene is played, that she's about to be raped. The audience cracks up. In short, he's a "bad guy" homosexual — punch him out, watch him cower! She's a dumb stereotypic blond — rape her.

VICTOR/VICTORIA is a truly nasty-minded movie, dealing entirely with cardboard cutout characters: the Wise Minority Group Member (Toddy), the Plot Device (Victoria), the Hung-Up Stud, the Closet Queen Bodyguard, and the Dumb Overripe Blond.

The only character with a trace of dignity is Toddy, who comes across as a trouper. That dignity is destroyed in the film's final scene, where he manfully fills in for Victoria in the drag act. What we see is this big, hairy, fat man, stumbling around the stage trying to look female, only he can't, he's laughing so hard (at what?). And the nightclub audience, even though it's the kind of performance that would turn embarrassing once the initial shock value wore off (why is this man doing this to himself?), they're practically in tears they think it's so funny. And Jim and Julie, well, they're seated down front, sharing the amusement, looking so heterosexually triumphant that I half expected them to organize a cookout right in the middle of the nightclub, then maybe duck out to a PTA meeting.

The liberal line on *GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER?* was that, well, maybe it wasn't a very good movie, but it was still a major breakthrough. It "dealt" with racism, and now we would see blacks in serious film roles. To which the only possible response is: name one. Name one major U.S. movie of the past five years that featured a black actor or actress in a serious role. Well, hey, fella, what do you want? After a while we just got bored with them, you know.

Yes, I do. Which is to say that mainstream U.S. comedies simply don't "deal" — they instead find brave new worlds to exploit and previously ignored ideas to trivialize. The line on *VICTOR/VICTORIA* is that it's a needed step toward liberation. Sorry, sports fan, I'm not buying. What's needed is not this truly malicious piece of celluloid. What's needed — now, always and ever — is occasional honesty, unfeigned tenderness, and all but amazing grace.

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

*E.T.*

## The ultimate patriarch

by Phyllis Deutsch

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Steven Spielberg's film *E.T.* is this year's biggest moneymaker. T-shirts and posters all over the country celebrate the space creature, and Neil Diamond has written a song using *E.T.*'s memorable "phone home" as its theme. Reviews of the movie are mostly positive, and reviewers generally cite the film's make-believe ambiance and happy ending as causes for its enormous success. In doing so, they — and most of the U.S. public — have overlooked the sexist backbone of Spielberg's superficially engaging fairytale.

The film's sexism is explicit in the sexual stereotyping of its characters. *E.T.* is male identified, even though the creature has no genitals. It is continuously referred to as "he." The first link between *E.T.* and Elliot is a baseball tossed back and forth: what better symbol of male bonding exists? Elliot, of course, is a little boy, his brother is a big boy, and all the children in the movie who have adventures (tinkering with telecommunications devices, fooling cops, riding flying bicycles) are boys. Elliot's sister is spunky and bright (she at least asks whether *E.T.* is a boy or girl), but she dresses up the creature, brings him flowers, and stays close to mama. Gerdie also teaches *E.T.* to talk, but this deed (which makes the rest of the film possible) is seen as far less important than the physical machinations of the boys.

Elliot's mother, another sexist creation, represents Spielberg's traditional view of the nuclear family as a sex-segregated enterprise. Mary has moments of humor and animation, but she most of spends most of her time hassling over concerns of everyday life. She worries about her job, her shopping, cleaning up, cooking, and taking care of the kids. She's so intent on arranging the groceries that she disregards Gerdie's attempts to introduce her to *E.T.*, who stands just a few feet away. Later, in a Halloween costume, Mary is cute and sexy (she's dressed as some kind of catlike animal) and as giddy as ever. While photographing her three children, she fails to realize that the one in the middle has a funny voice and a flat head. Like the buffoon in a comic

opera, poor Mary constantly misses the obvious.

Obviously her husband's departure exacerbates Mary's confusion. He has left the family and taken his mistress to Mexico. But Spielberg so steadily emphasizes Mary's inadequacy by caricaturing her as a frazzled housewife that the father seems to play a negligible role in the familial disaster. Following the disappearance of Elliot, a policeman grills Mary trying to find out if anything has happened in the family that might have caused her son to run away. Mary tearfully replies that her husband has gone and that "it hasn't been easy on the children." Clearly, she's the one at fault: she's at home and not, doing a proper job raising the kids. Meanwhile, daddy is home free in Latin America. In the viewer's mind, daddy's departure is subliminally excusable: would you want to live with such an unstable woman?

The children's complete idolization of their missing father is another nail in Mary's coffin. Mike and Elliot yearn for dad ("remember how he used to take us to the ballgames?") but are not angry with him. Surely children respond to a parent's departure more complexly than this. But when Mike and Gerdie tease Elliot about his goblin stories, he pouts and says, "Daddy would understand." He implies that mommy would not. In fact, Mary does grab the kids and run like hell when she first sees E.T. turning grey on her bathroom floor. This act, which strikes me as eminently sensible, immediately casts her with the other "bad" adults in the film. When she finally comes around at the end, there are intimations that it has something to do with that nice male scientist who watches over her with great sympathy. Mary gets a man, but it's unlikely she'll work any less hard, for in Spielberg's universe men don't do dishes. In this film particularly, they serve two mythological functions, both of which are embodied in the characterization of E.T.

E.T. is first of all an orphan, completely helpless being on an unknown planet. Left alone, childlike E.T. will surely get into trouble (remember his drunken stumbling around the house) or perhaps die. Casting E.T. as a little (male) child in need of help enables the director to cast his audience as mothers — Eternal Mothers willing to give unconditional love to a completely dependent creature. While external mothers are generally women, Spielberg continues his sexist motif by denying Mary that role. Instead, Elliot plays Eternal Mother to E.T.'s Eternal Infant. And Elliot's treatment of E.T. neatly damns the motherhood myth by revealing its destructive underside. Elliot is extremely territorial and speaks of E.T. as his special possession and pet. The boy expends a great deal of love on the creature, but he also controls him. Elliot's love — and Elliot's control — make it unnecessary for E.T. ever to learn more than garbled English. Why grow up if mama is always there? Spielberg shows the motherhood myth — embodied in Elliot and E.T.'s relationship as a symbiotic power game in which both parties play impossible roles. Mother suffers eternally from unrequited martyrdom and child suffers eternally from stunted growth. Spielberg may cart out the Eternal Mother to tug at our heartstrings, but he quickly dissects her and puts her to rest.

But Spielberg gives the Eternal Father resounding applause. When E.T. is not a clinging infant, making mothers of us all, he is the flipside of the fantasy: the ultimate patriarch who has come to mend the fractured family and restore order in the kingdom. Although Spielberg portrays E.T. as a comic drunk in the first part of the film, in the end he inspires reverence and awe. After all, he is a creature of profound intelligence and wisdom. He even dies and comes back to life. Is this King Arthur, Christ, maybe even God Himself? Yes, says Spielberg. And we all cry some more, blinded by the power of a different myth, one that moves from father to king to God with sweeping grandeur and leaves a lot of troubled women in its wake. In the film, as in life, the ambiguous Eternal Mother cannot compete with the purity, serenity, and wisdom of the Eternal Father, who gracefully casts a spell and quietly resolves all. Never mind that underneath is a whimpering boy-child, incapable of growing up. Never mind that underneath is Elliot's real father, who skips town when the going gets rough.

Spielberg knows his stuff, no doubt about that. Reviewers have praised the film's inventiveness and originality, but it's a hoax. The movie moves so fast, the images are so dramatic, and the sound track is so loud that we miss the sexist fireworks on display. What's really a shame is that there is much in these mythologies worth preserving: the emphasis on love, benevolence, and trust; the belief that wonder still exists, as do miracles; the implication that there are meeting grounds for strangers of all kinds. Spielberg could be a true visionary, but he is hampered by his passion for mythologies that separate human beings according to sex and perpetuate unequal power (and hence, love) relations among them. E.T. as characterized is a "he" who will always be taken care of by some loving mother because of his obvious vulnerability but who, at the same time, maintains the whip of control by dint of greater wisdom.

Movies like this are not a balm in our impossible times. They simply make matters worse by repeating the crimes that got us here in the first place. We should all stop believing in fairies until someone makes a film in which little girls have adventures on bicycles, too.

### *An Officer and a Gentleman* Male bonding and self abuse

by Jon Lewis

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AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN deals with the process of male bonding — machismo as self-abuse and tenacity. As the hero graduates from officers' training, he seemingly can corrupt society "on the outside" as the result. This film is not just another "armed services" picture. It is a timely social discourse, which not only celebrates an/the elite male group but clearly identifies the working-class woman as the enemy.[\(1\)](#)

It all starts off with a dead mother (suicide we find out — and not even the decency to provide a note for her son) and a reluctant "adoption" of the son by the estranged, seafaring husband/father (Robert Loggia). This aging sailor "keeps" young Filipino women to clean, cook, screw, and parade around the apartment half naked. The son, maybe twelve or so, is initiated into this sailor's world and his own "flight from feeling," a mythos identified by Christopher Lasch in the culture of narcissism which is patently antifeminist. The son, Mayo, will be the film's hero, and the audience remembers these scenes throughout the film, especially as the scenes relate to the film's presence/ interference/ treatment of women. Mayo's "flight from feeling" is purged only at film's end. There it happens through another, more significant male bonding ritual — graduation from pimp's son to future leader.

But beginning at the beginning — in the Philippines (done in yellow filter), Mayo, as a young teen, refuses to go to a "shitty" boarding school in the United States. He irrationally decides to "stick it out" with his fat, abusive, alcoholic father in "P.I." (the Philippine Islands — in the film we hear much of armed forces argot, language revealing the services' reductive bent).

In P.I., we have the first street-fight scene, with Mayo still a young teen (and not yet played by Richard Gere), duped and beaten by martial arts expert Filipino youth gangs. Not only do they thrash him and bloody his nose (which becomes a significant male-bonding experience, on either side of the blow), they seem to impart some of their mystical (judo)

knowledge. In the film judo will become a major male-bonding element in the officers' training school. And we wait almost all film for the duel between Mayo and his antagonistic superior, Foley. Such fighting "knowledge"/ability separates "the men from the boys," as in Mayo's street fight in which he bloodies a young tough's nose and in Foley's humiliating the company patsy on the judo mat during training. It is, then, seen as positive not only that Mayo endured P.I. as a boy but also that he got himself thrashed and bloodied — and even better that he had that "knowledge" imparted to him so early on in life. His arrival at officers' training predicates this clear-cut knowledge of a mystical male rite (judo) and Mayo's presence of mind to carry it with him as if it were hair on his gonads or on his upper lip. In Mayo's moment of greatest despair, he and Foley (finally) fight it out, both exhibiting judo expertise. It is Mayo's ability to externalize (through the mythos of judo/combat)(2) this social hurt that enables him to find the "strength" to hang in there, despite yet another (figurative and literal) kick in the balls.

The film depicts endurance and tenacity as male-positive traits in a cold world which seems to demand these qualities of its men (though few can answer this calling). Following this, the film emphasizes physical fitness as yet another positive male character trait. Such fitness seems an integral part of Richard Gere's (Mayo's) star image. As evidenced in his hanging upside down from the parallel bar in *AMERICAN GIGOLO*, Gere's fitness becomes part of his signification as a male sex symbol. In this film, that Mayo's tenacity carries over into such a material concern (for body, muscles, physique, etc.) suggests as well that the male audience member is invited to embark on the same relentless, physical-tangible, male-bonding quest via identification — to be like Mayo/ to be like Gere.

Physical perfection follows upon the camaraderie of the gym and the athletic field. The material step of bodybuilding signifies adopting the ideal of "team." As he proceeds through officers' training, Mayo employs his physical prowess as part of a kind of star presence in terms of the unit and his mystical adversary relationship with Foley, who, for all his superficial animosity, respects Mayo for the very tools both men identify as prized possessions. (Mayo had hustled his classmates with various scams to make money.) That Mayo's corruption(3) (as a capitalist, which, I suppose, is anti-macho) so irks Foley seems to relate to the two antagonists' equality on another level. That is, Foley would want to go into battle (which he predicts, offhandedly, could happen in the next few years) with a physical specimen like Mayo. This is precisely why Mayo's lack of moral integrity and honor irritates him so.

Foley's abuse of Mayo leads to a second rite of passage. Again we see Mayo's will to endure punishment as an integral part of how he identifies himself, once and for all, as a man and as a member of an elite male group. After Mayo is caught breaking the honor code, Foley tries to get Mayo to D.O.R. (quit) but "no dice." So Foley forces Mayo to endure physical abuse but to no avail. Finally Foley decides to reject Mayo

anyway, but the male bond is reactivated when Mayo cries. What he shouts through these tears simply identifies his need for the group — that Mayo has nowhere else to go, that this is his only chance to be better than his father.

Each of the many Foley-Mayo collisions, in relation to the ethic proposed in *AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN*, reflects how the group gets formed, how the individual male achieves positive self-image only in terms of this "team." *AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN* is like the generic "army picture" (that it's the navy is not the point here). In it we have the wop, the chicano, the black (broke and married), the woman candidate (wanting to be a man and eventually respected as one), the losers, the Okie, and the badass drill sergeant (certainly army pictures do little to veil the social significance of this genre convention). And from this diverse group, discipline and male-bonding rituals (fights, uniforms, drinking, etc.) lead to a working "fighting machine," a fraternity of sorts. Also the discipline shapes rather well-defined "individuals" who are not only tenacious (in their ability to survive and succeed) but also quite willing to accept (paradoxically) that incredible sublimation of selfhood for the good of the male group. In *AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN*, the genre's theme "common good" seems paradoxically to coincide perfectly with the phenomenon of male stardom.

But this "positive male" social agenda contains much pent-up aggression. That aggression is externalized in abusing booze (a fluctuating signifier of machismo) and women. As in so many "army" films, women here remain at the periphery of concerns and action. (I was reminded often in this movie of *FROM HERE TO ETERNITY*, which depicted the same, I think unwitting, alliance between machismo and self-destruction). For Mayo, booze is secondary, as if its abuse/use were without real importance. But since his father had whored around all his life (which mysteriously "appears" on navy records Foley has read) and his mother killed herself (for which Mayo clearly blames himself), women become the real object(s) of his scorn and blame and externalized rage.

The film sets up this system of externalized rage, etc.. The audience is clearly set up to at least understand and most likely to sympathize/identify with Mayo's formation before the entrance of the two primary female characters — Paula and Lynette — at the "camp social." Also the audience had earlier heard Foley's apocryphal warning regarding entrapment through pregnancy — a possibility/theme that is presented to the spectator as a ruthless and economically motivated female weapon. These women are further denigrated because they work in a factory. When they change outfits in the car so that they can garner invitations to the social, the film suggests that a certain degree of subterfuge is already going on. (In retrospect, there seems little reason why this should be the case.) Still, the women "enter" this male-bonding narrative only after such elements introduce them. In a way, their presence in the film seems important only in terms of the men they

screw and how this "act" affects the stability of the male group.

Their very existence threatens the male group. That, more than entrapment, must have been what Foley feared — he himself seems to have no "sexual identity" (like all good D.I.'s he has identified himself only in terms of the male group). But the rest of the unit has no such limitation, and Foley's tacit permission for them to learn the hard way leads to a series of real challenges to the future officers' bonds.

Paula and Lynette are formally introduced to Mayo and the Okie, Sid. This scene provides the groundwork for the way in which the spectator is instructed to treat the women for the rest of the film. Lynette (the one "with the incredible set of ta-tas") is the first choice, and she goes with Sid, who isn't the viewer's number one choice; clearly Sid isn't as leery of women as Mayo (and we) are. Paula, who simply has smaller ta-tas, sort of goes with Mayo, after she retreats behind her flashier blonde friend; her identification with Mayo elevates her in the film's overall character hierarchy.

Subsequently, their (Mayo's and Paula's) clever banter separates Paula and Lynette even further — Lynette, from the start, consists of a character of little more than body. But at the same time, Paula's association with Mayo also subordinates her — she's secondary to the male star and probably too sincere to dupe him (after all he's seen/been through so far). Such is not the case with Lynette. This character shows a real narrative impatience and an inclination toward centrality in the social discourse at hand. From the very start she surfaces as the "townie working-class girl" capable of being what Foley warned against. Mayo himself was such an Armed Forces love-child (another reason why he should know better). A further, serious bond becomes established between him and Paula when she reveals herself to be one as well. But this male-female bond threatens "the company" and Mayo's new identity in terms of this group. The real tenderness established with a woman serves as Mayo's excuse to drop Paula coldly without so much as a note or a phone call.

Again, as part of this macho ethos, Foley's cold exterior serves to identify him as one with "insight." Thus his prophecy regarding the local girls comes to pass, with Sid as the "victim." But the film does not let this challenge the male group. Sid (identified as Mayo's best friend — in that he knows that the star "is good," mystically, early on) rejects parental/ societal pressure to be an officer and quits the elite male company. But how can he deny the tenacity and strength of the male bond (and decide to be a J.C. Penney floor manager rather than a jet pilot). To go to Lynette is not the romantic move it at first seems to be, but rather an identifier of Sid's faulty reasoning. He had a romantic illusion of marrying Lynette and returning to Oklahoma (which turns him into the Ralph Bellamy of this movie — no one would want to marry him and move to Oklahoma). She quells that offer by conveniently having her period and rather coldly refusing Sid's ring. He is left with an alternative, prefigured by the categorical ethics of the film: suicide. Sid's

death is played out over a long duration, clearly a ritual of sorts, and is left on Lynette's hands. In fact, she is blamed for it even before Mayo and Paula discover Mayo's buddy hanging there in the shower. This rather jarring scene is capped by Mayo's embrace of and soliloquy over his dead friend and former member of the fraternity. It represents yet another cross Mayo must bear. As the audience is manipulated to sympathize with Mayo here, it leads to his second denial of Paula. He rejects her not only because she is a townie factory worker "like Lynette" but also because she is a woman and thus the enemy to the group and to the stasis of a world in which he has been "OK."

On this level, AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN hates women. The male bonding is shown as "good" not only as part of the American way but also as self-protection. The bonds of matrimony, which threaten "the company," become another test to deny tenaciously — yet, in the end, Mayo does go to the factory and sweep Paula off her feet (literally). This ending isolates the couple (from all the other loveless couples). Mayo tenaciously overcame the effects of his mother, his father, and his best friend and could grow to see Paula in a different light from women in general, especially women as represented by Lynette.

But how we read Paula's "being saved" is highly problematic. She still stands to gain a great deal economically/socially, and in a way social ascendance is Mayo's gift to her. He gets it as part of the superior position in the decision-making apparatus which the navy grants him as he graduates from the ordeals of officers' training. Paula's role is to complete Mayo's rite of passage. These rites let him have the right to acquire the most "attractive" female character. That woman then serves to verify the very social position the male group has provided him (and through association, her) with.

Finally, we should place this film in two other eighties' genres. First, it's one of those ratings-system hybrids: the "R" film which had to be cut and recut to avoid an "X" rating. Along with the remake of THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE, for example, viewers are pulled in by trying to figure out what was cut and trying to figure out how the film would look had these scenes been left in. Of course, POSTMAN prints complete with the excised footage are said to be shown in private screening rooms all over Hollywood. I suppose the same will/can be said regarding AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN. But neither film is particularly risqué, and the "relentless passion" promised in the advertising hardly appears in either film. Misleading as it is, the advertising signifies the studio's inability to identify these films' "genre." By mythologizing lost footage, the film gains the allure not only of a "dirty R" film but also as part of a new genre of Hollywood sexual vanguard films which defy "the code" to such an extent that a third party "had to" step in before the film's release to the general public.

Also important here, and I've mentioned this before, this film updates the "army" picture genre. I've seen the film on several occasions in economically depressed upstate New York. There the myths of male



bonding and armed service life appear viable and timely; they exalt an alternative, positive, and attractive course of action for the viewer. But in this very "act" the film positions (again and again) male versus female. Women structurally obstruct and threaten the male group, its solidarity, and its ways of transcending everyday mining town/mill town existence. This film serves a dangerous social agenda. It depicts problems in our culture while seeming to depict an alternative.

## Notes

1. Grafted somewhat artificially here from Peter Wollen's assessment of Howard Hawk's oeuvre in *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), p. 82.

2. Note that this externalization (mythologizing) is primarily or uniquely male. See Jerome S. Bruner, "Myth and Identity," in *Myth and Myth Making*, edited by Henry A. Murray (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), pp. 276-87; and Phyllis Chesler, "Patient and Patriarch: Women in the Psychotherapeutic Relationship," in *Women in Sexist Society*, edited by Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1971), pp. 362-9

3. At first I found Mayo's "honors violation" rather insignificant and silly. After checking into this with officer trainees, I've been led to understand that this type of behavior and attitude is altogether serious (given the rules at officers' training "school"). Officer trainee Richard Hegmann told me stories about D.O.R's precipitated by "smiling" when leading a platoon and lying about the number of pull-ups a candidate performed.

### *Chariots of Fire* Traditional values/false history

by Ed Carter

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"This true story soars beyond sports to embrace some of the deepest and most powerful drives in all human beings." (1)

"In its promotion of essentially Victorian values and its resolute focus on the past, CHARIOTS OF FIRE strikes me as the most reactionary film I've seen in some time." (2)

These two statements introduce us to the two sides of CHARIOTS OF FIRE. First is the popular notion that it comes as a breath of fresh air to the cinema: a film celebrating the lost values of sportsmanship, dedication to ideals, personal inspiration, and courage. Even before winning the Academy Award for Best Picture, it was a critical and popular smash. By March 1982, it had grossed \$6 million, twenty-two weeks after its U.S. release. (3) It received the First Annual American Critics Prize at Cannes, (4) was voted most popular at the Toronto Film Festival, and received two standing ovations at the New York Film Festival. (5) Most critics either called it a masterpiece or at least praised the film's joyfulness and excitement. But some reviewers saw CHARIOTS differently, as a poorly made, manipulative, and reactionary work. In both Britain and the United States, critics for mainstream and conservative journals and newspapers invariably approved of the film, and liberal or left wing reviewers condemned its chauvinism and championing of aristocratic values.

If we analyze CHARIOTS beyond all the dramatic trappings, we can understand what the film actually has to say about athletics, British aristocracy, anti-Semitism, religion, and nationalism. "A true story," claim the script, press material, and film, but nearly every incident or relation between the characters is a falsification of historical reality. But even if one ignores the historical "inaccuracies," the film does not actually proclaim the values that audiences believe it does. The two main characters' supposed revolt against the establishment, and CHARIOTS' promotion of sportsmanship and Olympic ideals, are all but facades for

the film's real loves — competition, elitism, and aristocratic national and religious traditions. The audience can both love and condemn reactionary values. They may dislike the oppressive, class-ridden society, of 1920 England and still revel in it, just as the film does. On many levels, CHARIOTS skillfully creates this double pleasure for the viewer. As Stuart Bryon said in the *Village Voice*, this is "a film whose subtext contradicts its text." (6) By covering its multilayered, highly reactionary messages with an audience-satisfying disguise, CHARIOTS has managed to become an innocent, critically acclaimed, taken-for-granted hit.

## BRITAIN

CHARIOTS OF FIRE opened in Britain in April 1981. Immediately the press divided over its merits. David Robinson of the *London Times* said:

"CHARIOTS OF FIRE is in most respects the kind of picture for which we have been looking in British cinema, in vain, for many years. It is proudly and uncompromisingly British in theme and temperament, with no debilitating concessions to chimerical notions of 'international' style." (7)

Robinson makes no mention of anti-Semitism, instead concentrating on "uninhibited Britishness." So begins the acceptance of CHARIOTS' veneer.

Jo Imeson, in the *BFI Monthly Film Bulletin*, recognized the film's manipulations:

"Puttnam has already demonstrated his skill at ... producing films which strike a neglected chord in the public imagination. The chord being plucked is the reassurance of traditional values at a time of national crisis, the comforting sense that inner strength will win through." (8)

Puttnam could not have picked a better time to validate the British way. With three million unemployed for the first time since the depression, riots in the streets, and British power and prestige dwindling away, CHARIOTS was just what the British needed to make them feel good about themselves again. And with an arch-conservative prime minister and a royal wedding over the summer, the atmosphere proved ripe for nationalism. Puttnam proclaimed a revival of the moribund British film industry in his Academy Award acceptance speech; he finished with, "The British are coming back!" Imeson also pointed out the duality of the film's approach.

"This is a delicately worked through instance of having our cake and eating it, too. These rebels against the system must ... become its finest adornments." (9)

So from the outset, the lines of critical opinion were drawn, but Imeson's view was overshadowed as CHARIOTS began to travel around

the world.

## THE UNITED STATES

CHARIOTS was voted most popular at Toronto, played at Telluride, and became the first British entry ever to open the New York Film Festival. It won no awards at New York but gained instant notoriety through a massive advertising campaign and word of mouth. As in England, the U.S. press split on their judgment of CHARIOTS. Almost the same number of reviews praised as damned the film, but the most widespread and influential newspapers praised it, so that critical impression became dominant. Typical of the new "minority" opinion was Carrie Rickey's *Voice* review.

"You leave CHARIOTS hyped up and humming 'Jerusalem,' party to England's colonial willfulness. Little wonder it's the opening night selection (in New York): CHARIOTS OF FIRE salutes the condescension and noblesse oblige of the dress shirts in the audience." [\(10\)](#)

At the opposite end of the political spectrum, John Simon not only praised the film (with characteristic reluctance) but pointed out (unknowingly) its dangerously seductive nature.

"[CHARIOTS shows] a vanished England that yet seems accessible to living memory, a graciousness that extends even to harbor masters and sleeping car attendants, a sense of the social fabric without rips or snags — except for a bit of religious intolerance and closed shop snobbery which in retrospect seem almost anodyne." [\(11\)](#)

U.S. conservatives and liberals alike were ready for such a film. For ten years PBS's "Masterpiece Theatre" had been importing British series that glorified the patrician classes, most recently (and most popularly, perhaps second only to "Upstairs, Downstairs") "Brideshead Revisited," which incidentally took place in the early twenties, just like CHARIOTS. Despite its aristocratic price tag of \$100 a seat, "Nicholas Nickleby" still won over New York in a coincidental run on Broadway. Even Gilbert and Sullivan, Harold Abrahams' passion, had its smash revival on Broadway with "Pirates of Penzance." Americans have always felt culturally inferior to the British but loved the culture all the same. And the general conservative turn, with Thatcher's equivalent in the White House and the Moral Majority on the loose, created a climate as ripe for CHARIOTS as the one in the UK.

"CHARIOTS is exactly what a lot of Americans want from an 'art house' film right now. Pleasant moments with pleasant people. No violence, no sex, at least not the dangerous kind. No danger. No fear." [\(12\)](#)

## THE FILM

"A true story," says the film, but only the main story has any truth to it. After discovering the extent to which so many details have been distorted, one ends up wondering if any of the film is true. CHARIOTS' opening and closing scenes consist of a very Anglican mass for the funeral of Harold Abrahams, whom we have known only as a Jew in the main body of the film. In the confusion, one wonders if somehow Abrahams' celebrity status in England was so great that he received complete acceptance in the establishment, and Anglicans hold mass for him — or perhaps the film is somehow anti-Semitic by denying Abrahams his burial rights as Jew. Historically, neither is true: he converted to Catholicism in 1934 (ten years after the Paris Olympics) and spent nearly all his adult life as a Christian. (13) Not only does this clarify the funeral but questions his battle against anti-Semitism. In fact, Abrahams was "hardly as concerned with anti-Semitism as the film indicates." (14)

In the film Abrahams undergoes an intense training that consumes all his time; he does so out of a fierce personal drive. In the 1920s, however, running was still considered a lower-class sport and athletics were not taken as seriously as they are today. Two or three days' training a week was considered excessive, and Harold barely did that much.

"Abrahams was a chap who didn't take his training as seriously as the group from beyond the Atlantic. He had his glass of ale when he wanted it, and smoked a cigar with evident enjoyment while fitting himself for whatever competition he might find at Colombes (the Olympic stadium at Paris)." (15)

And while it looks as if Abrahams is going to his first Games, he had gone to Antwerp in 1920. In the 100-meter race in which the film has one of its four climaxes, we see Abrahams' determination and confidence at its peak. But in reality, Abrahams claimed, "I did not think I had any chance a gold medal, nor did anyone else. I really never gave it a thought." (16) Therefore, half of the film's story is a fabrication, done only to make this man an admirable character and create a dramatic narrative that would enthrall the audience. After all, who would identify with someone who smoked and drank up until the hour of the big race and had no idea he would win? By extension, all the glory of Britain would receive the same taint.

The details concerning Lord Lindsey demanded two alterations. First, we see him and Abrahams run the "track" around Oambridge yard, and Harold breaks the six-hundred-year-old record. The real Lord Lindsey (actually Lord Burghley) ran the race alone, and he broke the record. He refused to see the film because of this "revision." (17) And he did not place second in the 110 hurdles at Paris, (18) which in CHARIOTS enables him to step out of his place in the 400 meters to allow Liddel to participate.

As for Liddel, he did not need to be pressured into changing his mind about not running in the 100-meter heats on Sunday, and then be

graciously offered a place in the 400. CHARIOTS gives us a heartbroken Liddel as he boards the ship for France, just having learned that the 100-meter heats are to be run on a Sunday. The Olympic schedules actually came out far in advance of the team's departure for France, so he already knew. He merely decided to enter the 400 meters instead, and no such meeting with the Prince of Wales took place. (19) And Jennie Liddel did not staunchly oppose her brother's running, as in the film, but wholeheartedly supported him. (20) Apparently she did not find this change offensive and deigned to see the film.

CHARIOT' Paris Olympics certainly seem rather calm compared to the calamity that actually took place. International tensions created a disastrous competition, and French fans booed foreign teams. In the film, a little booing seems to be directed toward the British, and the Americans are well respected; the reverse actually happened. (21) But it only adds to Abrahams and Liddel's underdog status.

In "revising" history, Puttnam, Welland, and Hudson have created a mythical rather than historical film. None of the characters seems truly realistic-more an idealization or archetype. The care with detail and atmosphere simultaneously lends historical authenticity and, since this time is really light years away from our own, gives CHARIOTS a legendary feel.

The most significant change in CHARIOTS is the depiction of anti-Semitism. Abrahams feels he must defeat the forces of prejudice that he senses closing in around him. Although we see no actual discrimination and only a modicum of verbal disparagement, Abrahams' speeches make us believe that 1926s Britain was rife with anti-Semitism. Although even the most tolerant society has individuals who do express their prejudice, in no way was England the place that Abrahams describes. With its society based on democracy, "English national culture absorbed foreign elements without suffering from an identity crisis." (22) In 1917, Parliament issued the Balfour Declaration, which stated that the British government would work toward establishing a Jewish homeland in Palestine. (23) Although anti-Semitism rose after the Russian Revolution, its "manifestation ... ceased during the early 20s." (24) Even a small outburst during this time was "not considered serious enough to require new strategy for the defense of Jewish rights." (25) And anti-Semitism always "had little ostentatious elitist support." (26) In short,

"The 1920s were a relatively quiet period for Anglo-Jewry, marked mainly by the shifting population from the older centers, and the spreading of Jews into a wider variety of occupations." (27)

Both of Abrahams brothers preceded him at Cambridge, and Dr. (later Sir) Adolphe Abrahams was Master of Operations for the 1912 British Olympic team. (28) So although the few remarks made by the Cambridge dons and others about Abrahams' heritage could occur in any country at any time, they represent what Harold believes to be a widespread phenomenon. Any time a film distorts history this way, even



if it does not claim to be a true story (but especially if it does), dangerous precedents are set. CHARIOTS OF FIRE is not a documentary and does not have to treat its material as such, and its distortions of history will hardly cause riots in the streets. But its reactionary depiction of the beauty of colonial Britain's elite gets quite a lot of its support from the film's assurance of truthfulness, thus giving it authenticity and so more power.

Although CHARIOTS overstates its depiction of British anti-Semitism, it still manages to totally understate the significance of anti-Semitism as a malignant social phenomenon. If we assume for the moment that CHARIOTS shows the state of anti-Semitism accurately (as the audience must), then it gives the hazardously false picture that anti-Semitism does not really amount to much and that one can overcome it relatively easy.

“The movie instructs us that any barriers of class (race) prejudice and pounds of sterling silver will crumble like paper mache if you only have the gumption to follow your inner voices and remain true to yourself.”[\(29\)](#)

“Abrahams' great wealth ensures him a privileged position in English society. There is no suggestion that he has had to struggle against prejudice to gain admission to Cambridge, or that his peers in any way snub him. Nor does his status as a Jew seem to interfere with his selection for the British Olympic team. In fact, the only anti-Semitism we witness is the wry condescension of a couple of aging dons.”[\(30\)](#)

We see no barriers to admission to the school, to clubs, or to athletics. No one says anything to Abrahams' face. The only truly vicious line comes from a wounded war veteran who helps Abrahams and Montague with their bags at the train station. After the two students have gone off in their taxi, he says, "That's why we fought this war, Harry, so Jew-boys like that can get a decent education." [\(31\)](#) Welland significantly puts the worst anti-Semitism onto a disabled working-class veteran while the upper-class slurs are more secretive and genteel. This seclusion of anti-Semitism has the unintentional (?) effect of making Abrams seem the arrogant, defensive snob that the dons say he is. Many reviewers got this impression:

“[He is] an English Jew with a chip on his shoulder.” [\(32\)](#)

“Harold is a fanatic.” [\(33\)](#)

“[Abrahams] is slightly paranoid.” [\(34\)](#)

“Abrahams is arrogant and defensive.” [\(35\)](#)

If these reviewers thought this of Abrahams, the audience must have followed suit. With the stereotype already having a long history (as evidenced by Gielgud's "as they invariably are" [defensive]), we need no

more portrayals of Jews imagining discrimination. When real Jews then complain about real prejudice, non-Jews begin to wonder.

CHARIOTS also makes Jewishness funny. Though audiences disapprove of the dons' patronizing attitude, Gielgud and Lindsay Anderson make them so overly pompous and silly that people chuckle at their ugly lines. When Abrahams first meets Sybil over dinner, he says he will have "the same" when Sybil orders "the regular." However, Sybil had no idea of Harold's Jewishness when ordering. By the time dinner comes, he has divulged his heritage, so the arrival of pigs' knuckles gets a big laugh, from the couple and from the audience. Abrahams is determined to fight the prejudice he has encountered but still finds it within himself to be amused by his cultural "peculiarities." CHARIOTS gives us the most innocuous vision of racial and religious intolerance. Filmic representations of bigotry should unnerve us and make us want to eliminate it. We see no reason to think that anti-Semitism does any *real* harm, that Jews can take it all in stride if necessary and, if they want to, can overcome it by proving themselves better than non-Jews.

Finally, Abrahams is really more English than Jewish, more accepted and successful than many of his peers. A nondiegetic rendition of "He Is an Englishman" accompanies the end of his speech complaining about the halls of Cambridge being closed to Jews. When the scene cuts to the play in which the song is being sung, none other than Abrahams leads the singing.

CHARIOTS fools the audience by making it think that it celebrates virtues that do not seem to exist anymore. In actuality, these virtues never existed the way CHARIOTS proclaims. Celebration of sportsmanship and the "Olympic ideal" appear most often in reviews (and in people's minds, no doubt) as the film's foremost meanings. Liddel and Abrahams do not run for money or glory or national pride, so they think, but for "the sport" and for reasons they value above sport. Upon closer look, though, we see that they actually perform as fanatically as any modern athlete: "It is clear that for both, winning matters much more than how they play the game." (36) In a Scotland-versus-France track meet, one of the French (!) runners trips Liddel, but Liddel thrills the crowd (in the stadium and the theater) with a miraculous come-from-behind victory that leaves him visibly exhausted.

This winning-at-all-costs attitude in no way resembles that of modern athletes, who value their bodies enough not to destroy them for victory. When Abrahams loses his only race with Liddel, he falls into a melancholic state and nearly decides to quit running. He had never lost before, and the pain of losing proves too much for his ego. Although modern athletes receive salaries that nearly everyone thinks excessive, runners and Olympic athletes are technically amateur and still risk expulsion for accepting under-the-table money. But in the 1920s only those who could afford it competed. A kid from Harlem or the East End could never have become an Olympic athlete in 1924.

"CHARIOTS is a reactionary enterprise stirring up the



audience's basest, most knee-jerk nationalism (the Olympic processional reduced me to rooting for the Yanks ... and brought Riefenstahl's OLYMPIA too close for comfort).” (37)

In so many ways, Puttnam, Welland, and Hudson manage to make us believe that they attack the very things the film glorifies. On the surface, Liddel and Abrahams revolt against the establishment, but they exemplify its traditions and values above anyone in the film. In fact, Liddel is too conservative even for the aristocracy; he believes in God above country, a much more archaic allegiance. And however much Abrahams complains, he still loves Gilbert and Sullivan and desires more than anything to become part of the system he supposedly despises. The film also embraces the aristocracy it purports to criticize. With voyeuristic camera movements and point-of-view editing, we feel as if we live in the 1920s London. Every scene is lushly decorated, from the (Academy Award-winning) costumes to the ubiquitous champagne. An outrageous pan/track through the Cambridge club recruitment event nearly has us drooling on the surroundings, and if we do not already feel we are there, we wish we were. The low, golden lighting on interior scenes bathes the characters and appointments in a rich glow. When Lord Lindsey sets up a series of hurdles, each with a full champagne glass on it, the audience gasps when he spills a drop or two. And genteel, proper servants of every description serve the main players, including porters, waiters, chauffeurs, and butlers. And each one completely humbles himself to those he serves.

In every way CHARIOTS allows the audience to have it both ways: they can guiltlessly adore the reactionary ways of colonial Britain, yet still feel morally superior to its excesses. Andrew Sarris noted this phenomenon in the scene in which the Olympic committee tries to get Liddel to change his mind. This scene has the most "frogs" per minute of any in the film.

“The audience gets a double dose of amusement, first by sharing his (Olympic commissioner’s) francophobic nastiness, and then by watching him get his while it (the audience) escapes unscathed.” (38)

The audience can participate in anti-French, pro-upper class, anti-Semitic, and even anti-American attitudes and still not feel shameful about it because the filmmakers expiate any possible guilt by momentarily punishing each of these prejudices. CHARIOTS thus provides lots of remorseless animosity.

The final, subtlest, and most effective reactionary idea that CHARIOTS peddles is fundamentalist religion.

“The problem is that Charleson portrays the character so appealingly that one can easily fail to see in this fundamentalist preacher/ missionary a 1920s precursor of the Moral Majoritarian. We all tend to admire people of principle, but I suspect there is more than a little

conservative calculation in the promotion of such a hero for contemporary audiences.” (39)

Liddel believes that God comes before all else and reads the Bible literally. Although sober and quiet about his faith, he still enforces his beliefs onto others, and in a hypocritical way. On the way home from church, Eric's friend complains that the kingdom of God is not a democracy but run by a tyrant. Liddel replies that no one forces you to believe in God, but he immediately does the opposite. He stops a young boy playing football and calmly but firmly tells him he should have been in church and that he must be there next Sunday.

Most of the time, however, Liddel keeps his devotion private, and we admire him for it. His sermons, both public (to miners who have come to see him race) and clerical (on the day of the 100-meter heats), do not contain any fire and brimstone. His personality and attitude make for a very pleasant, sympathetic symbol of ardent religiosity that audiences can believe in. Liddel's faith goes further even than modern so-called Moral Majoritarians. It is one of the heinous aspects of British imperialisms: the proselytizing of nonwhites in the colonies. And Liddel's mission is extracolonial: China. Jerry Falwell's plan does not include spreading the gospel to the Third World. Sarris went so far as to compare Liddel to another modern religious fundamentalist:

“My first thought was, Ayatollah, anyone? Do we really need any more people in this world who do not want to do anything interesting on the Sabbath?” (40)

So even though Liddel is far more conservative even than the aristocrats of his day, we admire him for his devotion to principle and his charming smile.

CHARIOTS OF FIRE has already become a piece of U.S. culture, to be quoted from as a modern classic. A current Budweiser commercial imitates the now famous beach running sequence, complete with horse (instead of men) splashing in the surf and mock-Vangelis synthesized music. The commercial makers knew that CHARIOTS has become so popular and so acceptable that pirating from it would be a sure-fire advertising gimmick. Even now, many people consider this film a truly inspirational masterpiece or at least a harmlessly entertaining piece of fluff. In the future, the voices of the few insightful reviewers and a fraction of the public who saw the film's true meaning will be forgotten, and they have already begun to shrink under the weight of the film's popular and critical successes. Like Abrahams and Liddel, CHARIOTS OF FIRE will become a legend, and the reactionary elements will be even harder to point out.

## Notes

1. Jack Kroll, "Ten Seconds to Eternity," Newsweek, 28 September 1981, p. 69.

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- [22.](#) Gisela L. Lebzelter, *Political Anti-Semitism in England, 1918-1939* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1978), p. 175.
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- [24.](#) Lebzelter, p. 29.
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[26.](#) Ibid., p. 173.

[27.](#) Vipman, p. 310.

[28.](#) Alan Brien, *London Times*, 5 April 1981, p. 42-C.

[29.](#) Stephen Harvey, "Grown-Up Hour," *Inquiry*, October 1981, p. 36.

[30.](#) Sertz, p. 55.

[31.](#) After the viewing, I still thought he was just saying "blokes [not Jewboys] like that." Only when I read the script did I know his real words. Certainly the casual listener, on first viewing, cannot hear the difference. But even this line is reactionary. This veteran says, without the least irony in his voice, that his sacrifices have all been made to help put an upper-class man through Cambridge. Abrahams was called up too late to do any fighting, so he is doubly privileged.

[32.](#) *Variety*, 2 April 1981, p. 18.

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[34.](#) David Brudnoy, *Boston Herald American*, 23 October 1981, p. B1.

[35.](#) Constance Garfinkle, *Boston Patriot-Ledger*, 23 October 1981, p. 19.

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### *Birgitt Haas Must Be Killed* State terrorism

by Hal W. Peat

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IL FAUT TUER BIRGITT HAAS (BIRGITT HAAS MUST BE KILLED) is a dark, unflinchingly hard look at one of the most troubling phenomena of the international political scene. It is the growing use by many governments, whether "democratic" or "authoritarian," of sophisticated, illicit, and frequently violent counterterrorist methods. Director Laurent Heynemann distinguishes his film from the usual tales of the print and visual media by a highly personalized examination of the characters and motivations of the people in one rather minor affair, the kind which inevitably appears as another distorted and sensationalized story in the newspapers or on television. In this sense, Heynemann's effort here gives us a prelude, a revelation of faces, facts, contradictions, and events leading up to the headlines and clichés which insidiously bury the truth.

The film's premise is simple. Various European intelligence and counterterrorist organizations have decided it is time to "eliminate" and "close the case on" one German revolutionary, Birgitt Haas. But Haas has been inactive and in hiding for some time. In fact, the authorities have simply continued to use her name and identity in their versions of recent confrontations with underground groups. Having built her "terrorist" stature to monstrous proportions by blaming her for masterminding these incidents, they are now ready to score a major "victory" for law and order by having her killed. This operation is left to the planning of Athanase (Philippe Noiret), head of a clandestine French antiterrorist unit.

Athanase's strategy is to use an innocent and unwitting citizen, Charles Bauman (Jean Rochefort), a man otherwise totally unconnected with the matter, as a pawn to lure Haas into a situation where she will become the apparent victim of a "crime of passion." A double of Bauman will actually kill her and be observed leaving the scene. Then Bauman, and not the authorities, will be accused of the deed. Bauman, after all, is separated from his wife and adrift in his life. Haas, in the male viewpoint of Athanase's group, is a woman whose liberated sexuality can

only be understood as a promiscuous sensuality they can easily exploit in order to eliminate her.

This plot is much like Claude Chabrol's *NADA*, in which the state does not hesitate to sacrifice one of its own members when expedient to do so and in which the mythic dimensions of the terrorist must be upheld and enhanced to justify the state's own illegal violence. The mechanics of counterterrorism in *BIRGITT HAAS* are used with even more terrifying expertise by the employees of the state than by their revolutionary opponents. As in Chabrol's film, we ultimately find that the tactics of terror become their own trap for whoever employs them, for whatever reason.

Thus, in several starkly ironic scenes, Birgitt listens in amazed disbelief to radio reports of terrorist operations attributed to her leadership. It is as though, once she assumed the public identity of "terrorist" by using revolutionary violence, the identity has gone on to grow an existence of its own. At the opening of the film, she faces the unreality of a self which has been cleverly taken over and fostered by the state for its own ends. Basically an intellectual and until now a quick-witted survivor, she understands at this point the necessity of no longer surviving — of surrendering or dying in order to silence the weapon her foes have created.

While they are practiced manipulators of events, Athanase and his second-in-command, Richard Colonna (Bernard LeCoq) discover their cleverness cannot always control events. Things begin to run awry when Colonna himself, characterized by his superior as "cold, mean, and ambitious," receives command of the mission to kill Haas. Athanase soon learns that Colonna has made the fatal error of mixing personal and professional convenience. As the lover of Bauman's estranged wife, Colonna uses the Haas assignment to frame Bauman.

But Athanase cannot change pawns: Bauman is already on his way to Germany for the job the unemployment department has just "found" for him. Athanase allows the plan to proceed to the point of the chance meeting between Birgitt and Bauman. On the surface, events now seem to go according to plan, but another miscalculation contributes to the failure of the scheme. Birgitt Haas feels genuine emotion for Bauman; she is not the uncontrolled nymphomaniac her enemies have assumed her to be. Haas kills Colonna after Bauman interrupts his double about to kill Haas in her hotel room.

But Colonna's death also proves convenient for Athanase and the authorities: it rectifies his initial mistake. Athanase, the more "humane" yet sinister member of the state apparatus, remains to tie up the loose ends.

Athanase is an interesting study of a kind of shadow-world version of the corporate man. As portrayed by Philippe Noiret, so often the amiable, agreeable man of French cinema, the character of Athanase has a resonance we might not expect in a man whose career is built on the

literal destruction of whomever the state decrees. Noiret projects something between the world-weariness of a Graham Greene exile and the hopeless obedience of a Kafka civil servant. "Should I get out now?" he wonders aloud to his wife one night in bed. "After this job," she replies, unperturbed. Of course, it will always go on being after the next "job." Heynemann never permits us to become so caught up in this complexity of characterization, however, that we lose critical insight into the meaning of Athanase's actions. Athanase fully represents a bourgeois political culture able to comfortably (for the most part) rationalize its resort to illicit activities against not only its declared enemies but also its own citizenry.

In a wider sense, Heynemann reveals the deceptiveness and danger of roles and role playing — whether intentional, unconscious, or unwilling — in a politically bankrupt society. Athanase eagerly acts out the role of friendly acquaintance and confidante to Bauman; it placates a part of his conscience to treat his chosen puppet in the most civilized fashion. Colonna, in turn, willingly acts as unappreciated henchman to Athanase one more time so he can be rid of his lover's husband. Bauman stubbornly refuses to acknowledge the fact that his wife has left him forever. Finally he transforms his manipulated situation by deciding to remain near Haas while she awaits sentencing. But in between, Bauman's larger manipulation by the state machinery makes him as much a victim as Haas. The very routine and precise way in which the counter-terror group carries this out, in fact, points him out as only one among many such victims.

Birgitt Haas herself, nevertheless, faces the most terrible of role situations. The other, fictive, being whom the state accuses of bombings and hijackings now overshadows her actual movements and choices. It has been as useful to the authorities that she should live as that she now should die. Realizing this, she opts to end the game as quickly as possible by running no farther. The extraordinary acts she hears attributed to herself and her lack of meaningful support from her former comrades underscore her present isolation. Everything conforms beautifully to the design of those who hold her within a narrowing circle. Even her private, sensual self has been probed and examined (if inaccurately) by Athanase's squad, who neatly insert one of their number among her lovers.

The deceit both Haas and Bauman undergo becomes the true terror of this tale in the viewer's eyes. Heynemann has put the intrusiveness of the camera eye to stunning use by creating a composite picture of a hunter, his bait, and his prey. In this sense, the film's narrative structure, while employing some classic Hollywood thriller codes, manages to work all its elements at a level that engages us in a more participative and troublesome manner than the passive, purely entertaining stance most thrillers usually allow.

The covert activities of the state, as demonstrated by Athanase and his employees, are symptomatic of an organism which not only attacks its

foes by any means possible while maintaining a facade of legitimacy and normalcy, but also is paranoid to the point of turning in upon itself in distrust and fear. Athanase and Colonna thus cannot ever really trust one another. Moreover, the visible branches of law enforcement do not want too close an association with Athanase's type or to know the sordid details of his actions on their behalf. (In this respect, their attitude isn't so different from that shown during the Watergate cover-up when the presidential office contrived to put itself at one remove from the mischief of its own "operatives.")

Perhaps the ultimate surprise of BIRGIT HAAS is that Athanase and his assistants, for all their omniscient power, fail miserably in their mission. Because of a final accident of mistiming, Bauman interrupts the planned murder of Haas. The secret agents must withdraw. Haas forces the German police to arrest her — the one thing they wanted to avoid.

Bauman reacts with dignified outrage to the revelation of his own manipulation. The most natural exit from the situation for him is one which Athanase has not counted on: he refuses to return home, even at gunpoint. In the face of such unexpected defiance, Athanase relinquishes his erstwhile pawn. Insofar as it makes clear to us the inward motives and events leading to one more headline, one more quickly forgotten chapter in the twilight world of "state" versus "terrorism," BIRGIT HAAS is an unnerving look into that closed file we cannot so easily forget — or want to forget.



### White Zombie Haitian horror

by Tony Williams

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According to certain critics, it is impossible to produce films made within capitalist institutions which criticize imperialist practices. T.W. Adorno believes that the culture industry always inculcates ideas of order so as to maintain the status quo.<sup>(1)</sup> Judith Hess develops this idea. Genre movies are popular, she says, because they temporarily relieve fears aroused by recognizing social and political conflicts. Although they address those conflicts, the various genres attempt to resolve conflicts in simple and reactionary ways. Hess notes three genre characteristics:

"First, these films (e.g., Westerns, Horror and Sci-Fi) never deal directly with present social and political problems; second, all of them are set in the non-present. Westerns and horror films take place in the past — science fiction films, by definition, take place in a future time ... Third, the society in which the action takes place is very simple and does not function as a dramatic force in the film — it exists as a backdrop against which the few actors work out the central problem the film presents."<sup>(2)</sup>

Horror films, according to Hess, attempt to resolve disparities between two contradictory ways of problem solving; rationality vs. faith, an irrational commitment to certain traditional beliefs. <sup>(3)</sup> I find Hess' approach too dogmatic. Many examples from past and later genre movies refute it. Fifties sci-fi movies such as *THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL*, *THIS ISLAND EARTH*, *THEM*, and *TARANTULA* were clearly located within their contemporary era. Consciously or unconsciously, they attempted to address themselves to the ideological currents of their time. Re-screenings of the sixties TV series *THE OUTER LIMITS* reveal contemporary issues of sexism and cold war paranoia now explicit from a later perspective. The seventies saw an U.S. Renaissance of "horror" movies, many of which offered subversive attacks on the family and capitalist institutions.<sup>(4)</sup> Yet what we see as explicit in that seventies genre was already implicit in earlier works of

the thirties and forties. (5) Genre movies can be riddled with irresolvable tensions and ambiguities, which can split the facade under which the films are produced.

Contradictory elements can enter a narrative to subvert the dominant concepts the film attempts to project. Certain mechanisms are common to the horror genre as well as other films. In his article, "The Anatomy of a Proletarian Film: Warner's MARKED WOMAN," Charles W. Eckert refers to the Freudian ideas of condensation and displacement to explain the existence in a film of tensions which can not be consciously resolved. Attempts are made at fantasy resolutions. But they are not always successful. Condensation fuses a number of discrete elements or ideas into a single symbol. Displacement attempts to resolve the dilemma at another level. Thus the way genre films deal with social tensions can be "both the result of conscious censorship and a myth-like transposition of the conflict into new terms." (6)

### THE WHITE ZOMBIE (1932)

WHITE ZOMBIE was made in 1932, a year which saw not only the worst of the Depression but the greatest production of thirties horror films. The film was directed by Victor Halperin, produced by an independent studio and released by United Artists. Bela Lugosi appeared once more as the symbol of a decadent Europe. Onto that figure U.S. isolationist fears were projected and often realized (most notably in DRACULA). According to Carlos Clarens in his book on horror films, contemporary reviewers found WHITE ZOMBIE "childish, old-fashioned and melodramatic." (7) It was soon forgotten.

An enigma, the film seems to be the only distinctive movie Victor Halperin directed, with a screenplay by Garnett Weston from his original story, inspired by the 1929 publication, *The Magic Island* by William B. Seabrook, an investigation of contemporary voodoo practices in Haiti. Clarens believes that it was not the topicality of Seabrook's chronicles but the fantasy elements that gave its concept resonance. Clarens concludes,

"Whatever period feeling WHITE ZOMBIE possessed at the time of its release has been erased by the intervening third of a century, making the images more faded, the period more remote, and the picture itself more completely mysterious."  
(8)

However, WHITE ZOMBIE has a contemporary relevance. It addresses itself to a concrete case of U.S. imperialism and is implicitly grounded in a disguised critique based on the devices of condensation and displacement, as described by Charles Eckert. The film's only enigma is whether its critique is conscious or unconscious.

Superficially, the plot reveals nothing remarkable. New Yorker Madeline arrives in Haiti to marry her fiancé Neil, a bank employee in Port-au-Prince. On board she met wealthy plantation owner, Charles Beaumont,

who now insists the ceremony be held on his estate. At the film's opening, Madeline and Neil witness a voodoo burial service at a crossroads, which location will prevent the body from being dug out and used for zombie purposes. Further along they encounter Legendre with his zombie entourage.

After the couple's arrival at Beaumont's mansion, Beaumont goes to meet Legendre at the latter's mill, worked by zombie slaves. Hopelessly in love with Madeline, Beaumont enlists Legendre's aid. During the wedding banquet, Legendre turns Madeline into a living zombie. Later Legendre, Beaumont and the zombie bodyguard steal her body from Beaumont's mausoleum to become Beaumont's mindless slave in Legendre's Castle of the Living Dead. Legendre then begins the same process with Beaumont.

Discovering Madeline's empty tomb, Neil enlists the aid of Dr. Bruner, a missionary, to go to Legendre's Castle, where they finally win the contest of wills. Legendre's zombie bodyguard perishes while the semi-alive Beaumont kills Legendre, falling to a joint death upon the rocks beneath the Castle walls. Freed from the contaminating forces of the Old World, Madeline revives. The U.S. couple are reunited, free to return to the "innocent" United States they left.

WHITE ZOMBIE seems to operate on a fantasy level. Its opening scenes articulate the film's manifest level: generic conflict between white U.S. rationality and native superstition. The first image is a long shot of a Negro funeral party. Small titles "White" appear on the frame's top half. Then, below, single drumbeats accompany the appearance of each individual letter of the larger title "Zombie." A Negro funeral chant begins. Neil and Madeline appear inside a coach. Dissolve from a long shot of the coach to a close up of Legendre's threatening eyes. Encountering Legendre at the roadside, the Negro coachman attempts to ask directions before he departs in terror at the sight of Legendre's zombie bodyguard. Legendre's black hat and cloak and his eyes have unmistakable satanic associations. Thrust into a strange environment of superstitious burial party, stereotyped frightened Negro coachman, Satanic villain and zombies, Madeline feels sexually threatened by Legendre, who has taken her scarf (later to be used for her transformation).

Much of this is similar to Universal horror themes of the thirties. But now the foreign environment is not Frankenstein's castle but Haiti. In 1932 it was no fantastic past environment but a Caribbean island under U.S. occupation.

#### HAITIAN HISTORY AND *WHITE ZOMBIE*

Haiti was under U.S. occupation from 1915-34. Although freed from French colonial domination in early nineteenth century by Toussaint L'Ouverture and Jean Jacques Dessalines, Haiti experienced many problems both internally and externally. Internally, color and class problems dividing the well-educated mulattos from impoverished blacks

originated from that period of early occupation. Externally, Haiti tempted not only European powers seeking to infiltrate the Western Hemisphere but also newly emerging U.S. imperialist ambitions. Once U.S. won its own West, its accompanying historical, territorial policies began to extend into the Caribbean. Official U.S. isolationist foreign policies were seen as relevant to Europe only and did not apply to the Western Hemisphere. Despite Woodrow Wilson's claims to repudiate Theodore Roosevelt's interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine, Wilson's administration had more instances of intervention than the previous two. By 1915, U.S. diplomats saw Haiti as ripe for invasion.

Haiti was then in political turmoil, nothing new. The opposing faction had executed the incumbent President along with his most feared administrator, the chief executioner. German businessmen resident in Haiti did not form such numbers as to justify U.S. claims of large-scale espionage, and though a clause in Haiti's Constitution forbade foreigners to own land, some Germans had married Haitian citizens to bypass it. In 1915, the U.S. made a pretence for involvement to restore national order in the face of disturbing internal conditions.

On September 3rd, 1915, the invading U.S. Marines proclaimed martial law. In 1916, a formal treaty legalized the occupation. In it Wilson set up an all-powerful financial committee, a constabulary organized and overseen by U.S. officers, settlement of foreign claims, and overall authority delegated to a U.S. military officer rather than a Haitian civil official. In his 1971 book, *The American Occupation of Haiti*, Hans Schmidt notes that the model was Britain's occupation of Egypt. Racial condescension towards Haitian citizens soon began. Worse was to follow.

Desiring economic power the U.S. occupiers removed the foreign landowning clause from the Constitution. Up to that time, every one of Haiti's sixteen Constitutions had possessed this clause, the natural aftermath of Haiti's original colonial experience. In 1917, the Haiti National Assembly refused to concur and attempted a new anti-U.S. Constitution, which led to the U.S. Marines' dissolving the Assembly, on the orders of the puppet President. The ownership clause was then dropped from the 1918 Constitution. Original peasant freeholders became peons, and foreign dominated plantations replaced an independent land tenure system. Slavery also followed when the North Americans introduced a forced labor system for their 1918 road-building program. Internal racial conflicts between mulattos and blacks worsened under U.S. occupation, particularly with U.S. officers from the Deep South preferring the former. Periodic guerrilla uprisings occurred, but not until the 1929 Cayes massacre and resulting public disorders were repressive powers gradually abandoned. In 1934, the U.S. occupation officially ended.

WHITE ZOMBIE has no reference to any of this historical background. Its generic associations as a fantasy could easily locate the film's action in Bahnhof Frankenstein or the South Sea Islands. Yet, the very location

used undermines the stereotyped functions the characters are supposed to play out on the film's manifest level.

In genre terms, Neil is the hero. Yet in a film set in 1932 Haiti, his position as clerk in the Port-au-Prince Bank makes him part of the influx of U.S. personnel, which had disastrous effects on Haiti's economic and social life. The white-collar administrators, of whom Neil is a part, dominated financial institutions, and thus they felt racially superior to the subordinated Haitians, both the cultured mulatto elite and Negroes. Although some social fraternization of Americans and Haitians began in the early period of occupation, before servicemen's families arrived in 1916, Jim Crow racial segregation soon began. The character Neil's underlying racial attitudes appear in his reaction to Dr. Bruner's suggestion that the kidnapped Madeline may be in native hands: "Surely, you don't mean she's alive? In the hands of natives? God, no! She's better dead than that!" Despite their manifest roles as innocent hero and heroine, Neil and Madeline implicitly partake of the U.S. corruption of Haitian life.

Plantation owner Beaumont seems the genre villain, representing individual aberration in an otherwise harmonious social structure. He wants Madeline, even as a mindless zombie. The film's iconic operations stress Beaumont's decadence. Although North American, he dresses in English hunting clothes, owns an English baronial mansion, and notoriously exercises "lord of the manor rights" over visiting females. Beaumont has an equally snobbish English butler, Silver, whom he employs to do his dirty work.

Dr. Bruner is suspicious of Beaumont's offer of his mansion for the couple's wedding: "Mr. Beaumont never struck me like a fairy godfather to people like you unless ..." He pauses to look at Madeline. Beaumont makes a final attempt to win Madeline before the ceremony, then uses Legendre's methods to achieve his sexual property rights by making Madeline his pliant zombie mistress. His desires relate to classic nineteenth century decadent romanticism, particularly the necrophiliac strains illustrated in Poe's *Annabel Lee*.

Beaumont's British pretensions set him apart from the "normal" North Americans, Neil, Madeline and Bruner. These pretensions, as seen in film stereotypes, correspond to hatred of England during the inter-war years (and even after, as George Orwell's forties journalism reveals). Cynics ascribed U.S. involvement in World War I as resulting from British deceit. Father Coughlin's Christian Front believed that a British Jewish conspiracy began the war. U.S. participation was supposedly secretly designed as a strategy to save the British Empire. Similar critical beliefs were behind attacks on the League of Nations. Some progressives hated Britain as a symbol of monarchy, privileged classes, and seat of Lombard Street international financiers. In the film *ISLAND OF LOST SOULS* (1933), Charles Laughton's Dr. Moreau personifies English tea-drinking imperialism's dominating an island populated by mutant beastmen. It's an obvious satire on Anglo-colonialism.

Yet, despite these signs of decadence, the character Beaumont is still North American; the film cannot escape this. Though *WHITE ZOMBIE* attempts to disguise it, Beaumont is as much a "wholesome American" as Neil and Madeline. He has not inherited his mansion but ruthlessly acquired it as a result of the U.S. abolition of the alien landownership prohibition in the Haitian Constitution.

Nor are his British pretensions accidental. Young imperialist United States had hundreds of years of the British experience from which to learn. Contemporary U.S. occupation reports explicitly recognized this. Hans Schmidt points out that these reports even drew parallels with British rule in India. Beaumont inhabits a baronial castle run by hundreds of domestic servants. He represents a microcosm of the contemporary authoritarian regime exercising power over a native population deemed incapable of governing itself.

Despite the butler Silver's warnings, Beaumont decides to request Legendre's aid and visits Legendre's mill. Beaumont finds there a macabre echo of the system which has given him power. The mill offers a dark mirror image of U.S. colonial occupation. Negro zombies work the mill grinder. Supervising them are two of Legendre's bodyguards. The ex-Gendarme Captain inhabits the top floor, the brigand chief below. When Legendre and Beaumont meet, Legendre sits behind a desk with the former chief executioner at his side. This most prominent zombie first attacks Silver and Neil later in the film — as indispensable as the chief executioner to the 1915 executed President. Also in an obvious parallel to Haitian society, we see that the Negroes do the menial work while the mulattos supervise.

Class conflict riddled Haiti's social structure before, during, and after the U.S. occupation. U.S. educational and economic development programs originally attempted to favor the Negro peasants and undermine the mulatto elite's privileged position. Client President Borno strongly subscribed to this initial policy of breaking down class barriers and eliminating the pernicious elite exploitation of the impoverished masses. But the occupation actually enhanced the elite's power, as Schmidt points out. U.S. administrators preferred the well-educated mulatto collaborators who were versed in European culture, a heritage of earlier French occupation, as opposed to the unpolished former black strongmen rulers. Although black nationalism began after the 1929 uprisings, it was not until the 1946 black revolution that mulatto domination eventually ended.

Legendre offers Beaumont a supply of Negro workers: "They are not worried about long hours. You could make good use of men like mine on your plantation." Black zombie slavery in the film thus represents a macabre version of the forced labor system which the U.S. inflicted on the Haitian population in 1918. This system dated back to medieval feudalism and was last used in 1880 by the British to dredge Egyptian canals.

The independently minded Haitians found it offensive. It reminded

them of the slavery overthrown by Toussaint L'Ouverture and Jean Jacques Dessalines. Many citizens were forced to work outside their own districts and often labored together in chains. Gendarme guards exercised close, often brutal supervision, with native gendarmes the worst offenders. Although the forced labor system was abolished in 1918, it caused native guerrilla uprisings.

The U.S. Marines put these down with unparalleled ferocity for the period, and the U.S. atrocities in many instances resembled those in Vietnam. Legendre's mill thus not only echoes the earlier forced labor system that the U.S. imposed on the native population but the contemporary miserable servitude of Negro Haitians.

Legendre's zombie bodyguard mirrors U.S. domination of both the privileged and revolutionary forces in Haiti: rich man, Minister of the Interior, chief executioner, Captain of Gendarmes, magician and brigand chief. Although played by white actors, the first three resemble mulattos while the last two Negroes concisely echo the racial divisions of Haitian class society. Although all were once his "enemies," Legendre now controls them all, just as the U.S. did Haiti in 1932.

The character of one once-affluent zombie who conducts Beaumont to the mill bears significant connotations. Legendre hates him more than the others, calling him a "swine — swollen with riches ... He fought against my will to the last. Even yet I have trouble in fighting him." By accompanying Beaumont that zombie prefigures his fate. This figure obviously represents the rich French-cultured mulatto element within Haitian society, hated by the majority of the black population. Legendre's speech uncannily echoes two levels of feeling against the figure. On the one hand there is class hatred. On the other hand, there is the U.S. distrust of that element of the population more affluent and better educated than themselves. Such a collaborator can never escape suspicion.

The second figure of Legendre's bodyguard, the Minister of the Interior, obviously also comes from the mulatto elite and represents the client President and better-educated officials with whom the U.S. preferred to deal rather than the former black leaders. And, as mentioned earlier, the chief executioner always stands at Legendre's side. In real life, the native population held this figure in awe not only because of his status but also because he consulted the President on how to control the masses. By 1915 he had such a powerful position that U.S. reports on the Haitian riots mentioned his death in the same lines reporting the execution of the incumbent President. In that environment he was certainly no minor official. The fourth member of Legendre's bodyguard, the Captain of Gendarmes, seems the only recognizable white man among the group, recognition of the racial group of this police sector. Once in occupation, the U.S. could not trust any sector of the Haitian population to establish and maintain military control. Thus, most Gendarme officers were former Marines given special powers by the Haitian client-government.

Although the figures of magician and brigand chief at first seem out of

place in the bodyguard, their positions do actually correspond to the contemporary situation of colonial control. Both represent Haitian forces who intermittently fought against U.S. domination during 1915-34. In the film, Legendre mentions that he'd been apprenticed to the magician but gained the upper hand and tortured him for the magical powers Legendre now possesses. Since religion provides a nationalist element to exploited groups, we can see the revolutionary associations of this figure. In Haiti, slaves used voodoo to maintain a common identity and provide a cloak for conspiratorial liaisons. Like all efficient dictators, Legendre realizes the importance of mobilizing the religious factor as a prop for his regime, and the magician's Negro appearance is by no means accidental.

The brigand chief, like the magician, represents another resistant sector brought under government control. He is undoubtedly a guerrilla leader representing Haiti's revolutionary groups. These were peasant soldiers who enlisted in short term military adventures, creating numerous revolutions before the U.S. occupation, after which the U.S. regarded them as a dangerous force requiring control. They played a major role in the anti-American forced labor riots of 1918-19. Like the Vietcong, they moved in a mountainous interior with great mobility. Ruthlessly put down in 1919, they still existed, made raids on the occupying power throughout the period of control. U.S. military reports designate them simply as "bandits," suppressing their real status, just as the film and the character Legendre do to this "brigand chief" zombie.

#### CONDENSATION AND DISPLACEMENT IN THE CHARACTERIZATION

Bela Lugosi's role as Legendre is clearly significant. He condenses several symbolic traits relevant to the U.S. Establishment's projected guilt fears. If the contemporary United States then saw decadent Europe as exclusively responsible for its ills, so Legendre/Lugosi stands as the cause for Haiti's problems.

In the film Haiti's status as an occupied U.S. colony is never mentioned. *WHITE ZOMBIE* represses depicting the dominance of imperialist politics and economics, replacing it with images of voodoo and the supernatural. Legendre's threat towards the heroine seems exclusively sexual. But if the repressed returns in a distorted form containing elements of the forbidden, then Lugosi's representing Legendre functions similarly. Legendre's personality, as represented by the film, contains contradictory elements. These disturb the film's manifest content and subvert its whole attempt at fantasy resolution. This ambiguity is also found in the Neil, Madeline, and Dr. Bruner characters to different degrees. Legendre represents a distorted embodiment of U.S. guilt feelings concerning the occupation.

On one level, Legendre stands as the evil foreigner, the outsider. Beaumont disdainfully rebuffs him at their first meeting. A medium shot shows Legendre's hand entering right frame while Beaumont turns his face away to ignore it. A close up follows of the hand slowly clenching in



anger, followed by a low angle shot of Legendre's satanic face. But as a mill owner, he works in the lower echelons of society. Despite being a necessary cog, he clearly hates the rich and their class system.

In a reversal in Legendre's Castle, Beaumont undergoes zombie transformation while Legendre carves his candlestick representation. Pathetically attempting to touch Legendre, Beaumont's hand enters right frame. Legendre pauses, commenting, "You refused to shake hands with me once I remember." He pats Beaumont's hand like a father does a child (or as a condescending colonial to a native) saying, "Well, well, we understand each other better now." Brushing his hands as if ridding them from some imaginary pollution, Legendre returns to his carving.

Legendre's class hatred embodies Depression U.S.A.'s vengeance fantasies about businessmen — the decadent Europe-loving rich who escaped Black Thursday and opposed relief policies for the needy. This element benefited most from imperialist ventures.

WHITE ZOMBIE thus has important links with the socio-economic aspects of the horror genre exemplified in films such as THE DEVIL AND DANIEL WEBSTER, RACE WITH THE DEVIL, THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE and DAWN OF THE DEAD. In one recent example, THE AMITYVILLE HORROR, the house acts as a condensation symbol for the repressed frustrations of the James Brolin character. He feels oppressed by the economic demands of his family commitments, but this never lead him to the logical conclusion that the capitalist ethos of monogamy plus mortgage is ruining his life. Similarly Bela Lugosi's Legendre becomes an imaginary condensation of the way that U.S. ideology understands the Third World's contemporary hatred of imperialism, an understanding which cannot be consciously expressed.

Similar condensations operate with the other characters. We have already noted that Neil could not in fact be pure hero by virtue of his involvement in the imperialist machinery and his complicity in the ideological attitudes behind the Haiti occupation. Neil and Beaumont demonstrate certain similarities despite their moral positions as hero and villain. A certain element of mirror imagery is present in WHITE ZOMBIE. Both men stand at opposite ends of the class and economic structure of society. Madeline fascinates both. Neil wins her by legal marriage; Beaumont uses the supernatural to possess her body. They want her as property, and both idealize her purity. Beaumont regards her as a "flower" and uses a poisoned rose in Madeline's bridal bouquet to turn her into a zombie. In the cantina scene after Madeline's burial, when Neil is going to pieces, Madeline's image appears, in her bridal gown, belying both her supposed decomposition and Neil's sordid environment. Madeline's image appears on a wall superimposed over a female shadow, and Neil attempts to grasp it; he is left with the shadow over his heart. Madeline's macabre fate is now related to Neil's over-idealized fantasies.

Neil and Beaumont possess Madeline as living marriage partner and living dead zombie. There are significant links between the attitudes of both. When Madeline suddenly dies, Neil speaks her name once and articulates her property status twice: "Madeline..my wife, my wife." Like Beaumont, he has necrophiliac impulses: "I kissed Madeline when she lay in the coffin and her lips were cold."

In genre terms, Madeline appears as the archetypal white female victim, the vulnerable feminine aspect of U.S. patriarchy always in danger from Indians, monsters, flying saucers, foreign invaders or internal subversives such as reds, black panthers and hippies. As bride-to-be, she reflects her country's capitalist possessive ethos, whether it be in marriage to Neil legally, to Beaumont's desires, or to Legendre's aims. She is the center of the conflict presented in WHITE ZOMBIE. As with Legendre, several elements are condensed in her constructed persona but in a special way. Her manifest status is that of threatened female victim. But her latent role is also significant. Madeline represents Haiti itself: the battleground for domination between what is seen as a legal possession by the U.S. forces and the illegal threat of the alien force represented by Legendre.

In a different way from Legendre, Madeline condenses the guilt feelings occasioned by U.S. occupation. She personally experiences what has happened to Haiti, moving from the freedom of life to the slavery of death. Her wedding gown is shroud-like, connoting her passage from individual innocence to propertied death. Earlier, preparing for the wedding ceremony, Madeline had appeared undressed, wearing underwear with a map of Haiti design. Madeline is possessed partner within the capitalist marriage institution and Haiti is North American property. In her zombie state, she loses all will power and thus echoes Haiti's plight deprived of government and Constitution.

Dr. Bruner represents white colonialist Christianity opposed to the native voodoo religion of the oppressed. He seems a benevolent missionary aiding Neil, but is also a cog in the imperialist machine despite his long residence in Haiti. He has remarkable links with Legendre, the "shadow" representative of U.S. colonialism. Just as Legendre uses voodoo, Dr. Bruner similarly uses it or benefits from its associations. Legendre first appears at the roadside wearing dark "Quaker" hat and cloak. Bruner wears similar clothes. Madeline initially mistakes Bruner for Legendre in the garden, and a dog's howl announces his arrival, the same howl that occurs in the graveyard scene where Beaumont appears with Legendre.

To Neil, Bruner says, "Because I'm a preacher, they think I'm a magician." Although he scientifically rationalizes Madeline's zombie condition, he finally has to resort to voodoo to save her. Bruner enlists the aid of a Negro houngan, inversely paralleling Legendre's use of a magician. In the castle scenes, we see a shadow on the floor that seems to be Legendre's zombie magician; we later realize it is Bruner in disguise. Finally, when Bruner puts out his hand to prevent Madeline

from killing Neil, we hear on the soundtrack the same tones earlier accompanying Legendre's successful attempt on Madeline's mind. If Bruner has not been drawn undeniably into the heart of darkness, as was Mrs. Rand in *I WALKED WITH A ZOMBIE*, he is already on the way.

## LOCATIONS

Important elements exist in this film concerning its contemporary heritage. In terms of *mise-en-scene*, displacement occurs in two major ways: denial of contemporary history and use of location.

As we have already seen, the film has no reference to recent politics or history. Were it not for a recognizable location, *WHITE ZOMBIE* could have been set anywhere in the European Ruritania of Universal horror movies. By denying contemporary history, the film displaces class (imperialist) politics and economics on to the levels of the personal, sexual property rights, and magic-voodoo. Yet because the film has been set in a clearly definable historical location, where U.S. landowners rule over huge estates and Negro slaves work in the mills, the transposition is not an easy one. Disturbing elements remain. But *WHITE ZOMBIE* diminishes the force of its location by removing the conflict from identifiable Haiti to the mythical Universal-like world of the Castle of the Living Dead.

The Castle of the Living Dead is Legendre's fantasy estate on an indefinable part of Haiti. Inside this mountaintop castle, Madeline is the captive princess. Her clothes now denote her change of status. She is no longer the modern American. Within the Gothic interiors, she wears an Elizabethan costume with spider's web design and plays Liszt on the piano to a repentant Beaumont.

Legendre's Castle presumably belongs to the French colonial occupation of Haiti. It is the Europe of *Frankenstein's* heritage, where innocent North America ventures at its peril away from its supposedly uncontaminated heartland. Legendre's rise in status accompanies Beaumont's decline. In the Castle, Legendre now wears a well-cut tailored suit in contrast to the shabby clothes worn at the mill. His power becomes absolute, uniting the supernatural to the economic. In his final scenes he wears a tuxedo similar to that worn earlier by Beaumont.

But the Castle does not represent a completely alien world. It provides a macabre mirror image to those other worlds outside. Inside, Legendre and his zombie bodyguard rule over Madeline, Beaumont, Silver and the Negro maids. That locale and its social relations parallel Beaumont's plantation (with its butler, Negro maids and livened servants) and Legendre's mill with its similar hierarchical divisions.

Finally, good triumphs over evil in a fantasy resolution. Beaumont redeems his decadence by pushing Legendre into the sea after his zombie bodyguard and Beaumont falls in as well. Both the monstrous

European and the decadent un-American symbols vanish from the scene, leaving Madeline and the audience to reawake to "reality." As Madeline becomes conscious, her last words to Neil are, "Oh, Neil, I dreamed." The lovers' attempted embrace is interrupted by Dr. Bruner's request: "Excuse me, but have you got a match?" As the white colonial figure and alter ego to Legendre, Bruner remains to restore normality and repression. The film ends.

Two years after the release of *WHITE ZOMBIE*, U.S. occupation ended. By 1934 the last Marine had left. Haiti's nightmare ended, but the deep scars left on the national psyche are evident today. Although we do not know, after fifty years, how much was deliberately intentional in the film, the film has much to say about U.S. imperialism then. *WHITE ZOMBIE* provides an important example of the disguised and suppressed radical critique the horror genre can often manifest.

## Notes

[1.](#) Cited in Judith Hess, "Genre Films and the Status Quo," *JUMP CUT*, No. 1 (May-June, 1974), p. 1.

[2.](#) Hess, pp. 1, 16, 18.

[3.](#) Hess, pp. 1, 16, 18.

[4.](#) For a survey of developments in this field, see Robin Wood, *The American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film* (Ottawa: Canadian Film Institute, 1979).

[5.](#) This will be the theme of my forthcoming book, *Family: The American Nightmare*.

[6.](#) Charles W. Eckert, "The Anatomy of a Proletarian Film: Warner's *MARKED WOMAN*," *Film Quarterly*, Winter 1973-74, p. 20.

[7.](#) Carlos Clarens, *Horror Movies* (London: Panther, 1968), p. 136.

[8.](#) Clarens, p. 137.

### *Coal Miner's Daughter. Honeysuckle Rose. The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia* Taking the class out of country

by Mary Bufwack

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With "Coal Miner's Daughter," a song of working-class pride, Loretta Lynn had a country hit in 1970. Six years later she used its title for her autobiography, which in 1980 was turned into a popular film. This transformation of cultural materials provides a direct example of how the film industry, in its continual groping for new ideas, has turned to the lives and culture of working people as a source for new material.

Eighteen movies with country music-related themes were produced in 1980 and 1981. This explosion of films followed closely on the heels of Hollywood's financially successful movie/sound track, SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER (1977). Films about country performers promised to be profitable because of the growing popularity of country music among diverse audiences. The last decade saw a 25 percent increase in country radio stations, to a total of 2,403. In 1980 there were twelve television network country specials, twenty-three syndicated country programs, and numerous locally produced country shows filling the Saturday afternoon airwaves. Country record sales were only slightly behind rock-and-roll sales, and while record sales were off 30 percent, country record sales grew by 20 percent. Hollywood was quick to realize that films about country performers make good vehicles for songs, sound tracks, and greater profits.

Three recent films centered on country music are COAL MINER'S DAUGHTER (1980), HONEYSUCKLE ROSE (1981), and THE NIGHT THE LIGHTS WENT OUT IN GEORGIA (1981). Each of these films tries in different ways to appear as an authentic presentation of the life of a country performer. COAL MINER'S DAUGHTER can be judged against the life of Loretta Lynn and her autobiography of the same title. HONEYSUCKLE ROSE acquires authenticity through singer/songwriter Willie Nelson, who plays the starring role of country entertainer Buck Bonham. However, the character Buck's life as a continually struggling musician in no way resembles that of Willie Nelson, whose early success

in Nashville in the 1950s put him in the country music mainstream. Rather, the film draws on the outlaw image Nelson has forged since his return to Texas and encourages us to believe Nelson is playing himself. *THE NIGHT THE LIGHTS WENT OUT IN GEORGIA* uses neither a real life story nor seasoned country performers. It attempts to generalize about the problems of aspiring performers through the lives of Travis and Amanda Child, a brother-and-sister team traveling to Nashville and country stardom.

The portrayals of country performers in *COAL MINER'S DAUGHTER*, *HONEYSUCKLE ROSE*, and *THE NIGHT THE LIGHTS WENT OUT IN GEORGIA* are different from those in earlier Hollywood films. The in-depth probing of performers' personal and emotional lives contrasts with the superficial presentations of country performers in film shorts as early as 1929, in cowboy films throughout the 1930s and 1940s, and in teenage rock films in the 1950s. Performers' lives in 1980 are not like the rags-to-riches-through-hard-work saga of Jimmie Davis (*LOUISIANA*, 1944), best known for writing "You Are My Sunshine." The films' endings are not the simultaneous discovery of love and success which Elvis found, as in his semiautobiographical story of a naive but gifted performer in *LOVING YOU*, 1956. Nor do contemporary country performers' stories end tragically as did both the film of Hank Williams' life (*YOUR CHEATIN' HEART*, 1964) and the story of a dissipated, drunken, pill-popping singer based on the life of Waylon Jennings (*PAYDAY*, 1973). In 1980, performers' lives are depicted on film not without tensions, but without any simple solutions, the singers keep on living and trying. The more recent film characters who are country singers are not distinguished by the largeness of their accomplishments or indulgences but by the tenacity with which they pursue their own vision of a life worth living.

Traditionally, the mass media have portrayed the white working-class audience of country music as macho and racist, a source of social evil and a symbol of a dying United States. An exception was Peter Bogdonovich's *THE LAST PICTURE SHOW* (1971), which used Hank Williams's music to highlight the alienation, yet strength, of working people as they confronted a changing world and an uncertain future in postwar United States. Far more often, the white working class has been depicted in Hollywood film as a brutish and spiritually poverty-stricken group. For example, *FIVE EASY PIECES* (1970), which used a Tammy Wynette sound track, condescendingly drew parallels between middle-class alienation and working people's wasted lives — with the sadistic power of the former shown as preferable. In *DELIVERANCE* (1970), professional men returned to a natural setting to rejuvenate themselves. Rather than peace and wholeness, they found an animalistic violent backwoods inbred horde, whose only link to civilized sentiment was their music. And Robert Altman's disillusionment and cynicism in *NASHVILLE* (1975) was middle-class United States' answer to country performers, who often were asserting in their music that they had inherited the strengths upon which the United States was built.

These films used authentic country and folk music to identify characters as poor and working class, yet they encouraged the further denigration of working people and their culture. They presumed the social system was deficient. But their search for an end to middle-class alienation in the communal and cultural life of poor and marginal people was based on a nightmare-like fantasy. The status quo was defended, not by a positive portrayal of life, but by depicting the working class as mired in stupidity, shallowness, and brutality.

The denigration of working people and country music did not escape the notice of Nashville musicians, country fans, or film directors aiming their films at working-class audiences. Country music and working people fared better in films with popular male stars who were assigned a working-class identity. Burt Reynolds was a Robin Hood, a con-man, and a country music promoter in John Avildsen's comedy set in the South, *W. W. AND THE DIXIE DANCE KINGS* (1976). *EVERY WHICH WAY BUT LOOSE* (1978), one of the highest grossing films in Hollywood history, also used popular stereotypes of country music for comic effect.

Loretta Lynn's already well-formed, defensive, working-class attitude was strengthened in this cultural climate. Her autobiography was written as a direct response to *NASHVILLE*. In the introduction to *Coal Miner's Daughter* she writes:

"... Well, I met that girl who played the top country singer in the movie. She came to Nashville and talked to me and watched me perform for a few weeks. If she tried to imitate me in the movie, that's their problem. If they really wanted me, why didn't they just ask me?"

"But I ain't worrying about no movies. My records are still selling, and I get more offers for shows than I can handle. So if you're wondering whether that character in the movie is me, it ain't. This book is me. I've got my own life to lead."

The directors of the three films I wish to discuss here — *COAL MINER'S DAUGHTER*, *THE NIGHT THE LIGHTS WENT OUT IN GEORGIA*, and *HONEYSUCKLE ROSE* believed the authentic tone of their films would contribute to a more positive image of country performers. Michael Apted had experience filming regional stories and the world of music in England. He wanted *COAL MINER'S DAUGHTER* to be realistic, loving, and close to the life of Loretta Lynn. Jerry Schatzberg describes himself as a fan of Texas music and believes *HONEYSUCKLE ROSE*, like his film *THE SEDUCTION OF JOE TYNAN*, expresses the problems of people confronting corrupt systems. Ron Maxwell had experience in public television before directing *THE NIGHT THE LIGHTS WENT OUT IN GEORGIA*. He chose the script because he identified with the characters and wanted the film to counteract negative myths about the South.

Despite their intentions, the directors did not do justice to the rich

stories of southern working people and country performers. Their use of cultural and social reality was guided by concerns that create distorted images. Apted consciously chose to leave out any references to unionization in mining communities because he believed that even broadly defined political issues would distort Loretta's story. He ignored Lynn's own political concerns and the benefits she has performed for miners and Native Americans. Schatzberg wanted HONEYSUCKLE ROSE to be a love story through music, but he was unconcerned with the range of issues generally dealt with in Texas country music. Maxwell made THE NIGHT THE LIGHTS WENT OUT IN GEORGIA a sympathetic story by stripping the southern community of any distinct identity except for an evil, violent sheriff. Even the music performed by Quaid and McNichol is more pop and rock than country.

It's unfortunate that the directors did not stay closer to stories drawn from the actual lives of country performers. If they had, these films might have raised problems shared by working people, problems that country singers raise in their songs. Country entertainers' lives are extreme representations of a central working-class dilemma. How is one to retain ties with friends, neighbors, and family and a pride in one's background and at the same time aspire to the material wealth, fulfilling work, and personal freedom promised by class mobility? Country performers attempt to live in both worlds but remain marginal to both. Though often rich, most performers have working-class backgrounds. Even those who don't must maintain an identity with working-class life, for they are part of a musical culture which assumes the task of representing and interpreting the lives of its working-class audience. Commercial success distances performers from the material and social reality of working-class life, but it does not fully integrate them into a middle-class world.

In all three films, the working-class dimensions of the country performer's life are glossed over, and the terms of the central dramatic conflict are changed. The primary tension in the life of a country entertainer is transformed from the personal and social problems of class mobility to those of a talented individual, who must make a personal choice between a career and a family. In other words, problems shared by the working class are transformed into problems of middle-class professionals. This "story" transformation is ideological and has economic repercussions. The central character's dilemma now lets broad middle-class audiences identify with the film.

Even the story of a performer as class-identified as Loretta Lynn is reduced to the tensions between career and family. COAL MINER'S DAUGHTER accomplishes this by isolating Loretta and her family from more extended social ties and portraying Loretta as a loner. The film opens with Loretta alone on a horse. Here Sissy Spacek's quiet and enigmatic acting style turns Loretta Lynn from the outgoing gregarious person described in her autobiography into a withdrawn and brooding individual, who observes rather than participates. We get brief glimpses of community life. But the main human interaction comes in close



family scenes, where squeezed into small dark rooms the family members find a comforting intimacy. When Loretta marries and must follow her husband Doolittle to the state of Washington, she recreates a warm family with her own children, but her success as a singer disturbs family life. Loretta lives her life on the bus and in dressing rooms while Doo and the children watch Loretta in the glow of the television. The film ends with Doo and Loretta on a hill overlooking a valley, arguing about the smaller home they will build. They hope to recover family togetherness on that hillside reminiscent of her childhood home.

In HONEYSUCKLE ROSE, Buck Bonham experiences the conflict of family and career in its most clichéd form — sexual fidelity. Buck too is a loner. In the first scene we see him alone in a field at sunrise practicing his golf swing. The cool, laid-back style of Willie Nelson gives Buck a warm but aloof and controlling presence. Buck's life oscillates between the party with the band on the road and the party with his wife and child at home. The erotic family ice-cream fights, and his playful loving attention, do not stop Buck's wife, Viv, from questioning his sexual fidelity. Then Buck's best friend and fellow band member, Garland, quits the road to remain at home. Garland's daughter, Lily, takes his place as guitarist for the band, and the romance between her and Buck takes place on- and off-stage. Unexpectedly, Viv arrives at a concert to announce from the stage that she is divorcing Buck. In the final scene, he returns to Viv, and from a stage they sing a duet about their mutual love.

The conflict of family versus career is more polarized in THE NIGHT THE LIGHTS WENT OUT IN GEORGIA as brother and sister Travis and Amanda choose different directions. The two are detained in a small town on their way to Nashville and must choose between the friendships and love they find there and the lure of Nashville. We first see Travis running from a motel room pursued by an irate father. Amanda whizzes by in a truck to rescue him for their next engagement. When the irresponsible Travis is arrested, the practical Amanda finds a roadhouse owner, Andy, who will pay Travis's fine in exchange for work in his bar. When the fine is worked off, Amanda prepares to leave town, but in a moving scene Travis says he'll remain with Melody, the woman he loves. Amanda replies that she would not give up her singing career even to be with her lover Conrad. In a too-simple plot resolution, the jealous police chief kills Travis. As Amanda drives out of town after the funeral, Conrad joins her. Even having made a decisive choice against family, Amanda gets both career and family.

These films end on a note that affirms the necessity of the family. But none portrays the family as able to satisfy individual psychological needs or so attractive that it should be chosen over creative work. Lynn's family in Kentucky is warm and good-natured, but Loretta's marriage to Boo only offers a round of battles and a life of loneliness. Buck's wife turns family life into erotic play, but she refuses to go on the road with him, and he gets restless after only a few days at home. Amanda rejects the secluded and quiet life of the small town policeman, who has a major

diversion in target practice. Even children do not provide reason enough to keep Loretta or Buck off the road. Family life does not engage the interests of these performers, and relations between the spouses appear to have little depth. A spouse's tenacity and continuing love offers indispensable support to the performer, but since shared concerns are minimal, what holds families together remains mysterious.

Work is portrayed as personally gratifying, social, and a source of enjoyment. This romanticized image of work, which can compete with a sentimentalized image of the family, ignores many of the alienating aspects of work in the music business. Lynn's fans are voracious consumers, driving her to a mental collapse, but we see the roles of agents, corporate executives, and record producers as only supportive. The agent whom Amanda Child contacts is open and helpful, and the worst problem Bonham has is whether or not he will wear different clothes. Work for Buck and Amanda is an erotic party, not the exhausting grind faced by Lynn. The primary criticism these films make of work is its threat to the family, not its profit motive and corporate structure. These change performers into commodities, separating performers from the social roots of their inspiration and producing a negative impact on the culture as a whole.

Since career threatens the family, the promise of wealth would seem like the obvious motivation justifying the career, but each of these films defies the monetary motive. Neither is the impulse toward career socially rooted. Lynn's motivations have a Freudian cast. Pushed into singing by her husband, at her father's graveside she resolves to become a singing success. Is it only to immortalize her coalmining father in song? In real life, while Lynn's father was exceptionally important to her, she has often expressed the pleasure she receives from singing, writing, and communicating with an audience. In *HONEYSUCKLE ROSE*, Buck Bonham has an artistic, individual vision that compels him to make music. He believes that success will come to him after companies have exhausted the less committed and inventive performers. Although the film depicts his individualism by nothing more than the way he dresses, he is shown as uncompromising in his intention to continue to perform. Amanda Child enjoys the adulation of the crowd, and through performing on stage she is transformed from a dependent girl to an independent woman. The audience and performer's mutual satisfaction in creating a shared experience and the performer's need to influence a larger social sphere never receive their due in these films as motivation or as social reality.

By reducing the drive to perform to individual psychological needs, the performer's culture is reduced in the films to a series of personal statements. The nature of culture as a phenomenon shared and produced by a social group is replaced by an image of the performer as alone, expressing personal emotions. The music in these films seems to grow directly from love experiences. Loretta Lynn's songs, even those with social references beyond herself, are counterpoised to personal events. In *COALMINER'S DAUGHTER* Lynn sings "You Ain't Woman

Enough" after catching Doo in the backseat of a car in the arms of another woman. But real-life Loretta claims she wrote the song after a fan accused her of stealing that woman's man. In fact, Lynn often writes songs to express her fans' lives even if their experiences are not her own. The songs Buck sings in HONEYSUCKLE ROSE are even more personal. They substitute for dialogue about interpersonal relations between himself and his wife and lover. Travis and Amanda Child similarly put their love lives into song.

Like all performers they give personal emotions greater strength and depth through song. However, their songs seem truncated presentations of the range of human emotions as well as limited presentations of the wide range of concerns that country music usually addresses. The special relation between the country audience and performer, in which the performer expresses the lives and desires of the audience, is reduced in these films to shared experiences in love. Eliminating personal responses to other events threatens to reduce performers to singers who remain interesting only so long as their love lives seem painful and compelling. The plot device of using personal love life as the main source of musical inspiration imposes a limiting view in these films of culture and of artists.

Performers' social isolation, pain, and irrational compulsion are shown as bearable because they have pleasurable and supportive relations created through shared interests and work. In these films, people who work together have more interests in common than do spouses. Pleasures in work relations pose the real threat to family. Early in Lynn's career, she and singer Patsy Cline became friends, exchanging gifts, personal problems, and professional insights. This friendship threatens Lynn's marital bond, as we see in one violent scene when Loretta chooses to wear makeup following Patsy's suggestion in defiance of Doo's wishes. Buck seems more disturbed by Garland's decision to leave the road than by his wife's pleas; when he does have a romance it is with a woman who shares his musical and road life. Travis and Amanda have a cooperative and affectionate relationship, writing together and caring for each other. As brother and sister fellow performers, they even watch out for each other's sex lives. These noncompetitive, close friendships finally must give way to the family. Cline dies, Garland leaves, and Travis chooses the woman he loves over Amanda, but these relations still seem the most trouble free and loving, drawing performers into meaningful relations outside the nuclear family

Caught between family and career, wavering and uncertain, the performers are not the real "heroes." Their confusion is contrasted with those who choose the ordinary life. These are the humble ones who do not feel a continual need to distinguish themselves, who give unselfishly, and who find satisfaction in family and community. The performers are flawed and weak, requiring drugs, sex, adulation, but most importantly the presence of these strong supportive people. Lynn's father, Bonham's sidekick who gives up the road, and Travis Child are admirable. Both Doolittle and the patrolman who follows Amanda are so independent

that they can act outside of masculine values and stick by their women. Buck's wife's love is stronger than her pride. These friends and family members have no resentment or ambition in their support. Their success lies in rejecting social norms of success and in finding contentment backstage. That the performers continue to need them gives these supporting characters a moral superiority and attractiveness that competes with the performer's appeal.

This same contrast between the striver and the individual satisfied with what s/he has — success versus family — has been a popular theme within country music. And, as in the films, the content individual is portrayed as more valuable. But country music has developed this conflict within a working class context and has carried with it a more subversive social critique. Usually country music articulates the tension between success and the family as a tension between classes. Country music turns the social structure upside down, contending that the poor are the wealthiest. Thus working people have wisdom, love, contentment, and community in Dolly Parton's "Chicken Every Sunday" (1970) and Merle Haggard's "Okie From Muskogee" (1969). According to country music, life is not only bearable within the working class, it is superior to that within the middle class.

Middle-class people — as Hank Williams, Jr., sings in "The American Way" (1980) — care only about the dollar. Mobility brings material prosperity, but it also destroys family and community, resulting in spiritual poverty. Early in her career in 1962, Loretta Lynn sang "Success Is Breaking Up Our Home." Jeanne Pruett warned women of the pitfalls of marrying for wealth in "Satin Sheets" (1973). In "Two-Story House" (1980) George Jones and Tammy Wynette tell of how they have accomplished their dreams yet of the absence of love amid their newly acquired material splendor. Love is destroyed by the drive for wealth, not poverty.

Often singers present the love of men and women not just as individual but also as an affirmation of mutual class identity, as in Melba Montgomery and Charlie Louvin's song of mutual praise, "Something to Brag About" (1970). In choosing to love others who like themselves are poor and obscure, men and women express a family solidarity that simultaneously expresses personal love and class allegiance. In country music, personal experiences are closely tied to class realities. The conflict of success versus family conforms to class oppositions that dominate working people's lives.

The picture of working-class life that generally emerges in country music does not stand as a documentary description of working-class experience. Like all culture it is a constructed image which fulfills many of the needs and aspirations of those who make and consume that culture. Country music has provided an arena in which a defensive working-class ideology has been created, preserved, and developed. The music challenges images of the working class created elsewhere. It opposes to the definition of the poor as financially and morally bankrupt

an identity with integrity and dignity. It does not encourage people to blame themselves for their hard times but to find virtue within the experience. It does not advance individual mobility as a personal solution, for it exposes the undesirable aspects of middle-class life. It encourages people to focus on the quality of life and to oppose the ethos of production and materialism. It presents the working-class way of life as a choice, and it invests that choice with moral superiority. It offers cultural resistance to widespread images that are destructive individually and collectively.

It is no accident that two of these three films about country performers are about women, for women have taken a particularly important role here in expressing working-class sentiment. Loretta Lynn does not just add a woman's voice to country music. She offers a voice for all working people. As working-class women have used country music to find their own purpose and identity, they have used the image of an egalitarian community to express their need for equality. As women they can more sharply express aspirations to personal autonomy and also more freely voice the desire for community. Articulating their own needs, women country performers give traditional working-class aspirations new life.

When the defensive working-class ideology is taken out of a collective context as in *COAL MINER'S DAUGHTER*, *HONEYSUCKLE ROSE*, and *THE NIGHT THE LIGHTS WENT OUT IN GEORGIA*, it is placed in the context of an individual conflict between career and family. There it loses much of its subversive power. It is no longer part of the constant struggle of working people for self-definition. It becomes a romantic view of the family and individual creative work, which reinforces the status quo, or a pessimistic view of the eternal nature of problems, which makes protest futile.

To do justice to the lives and culture of working people, these films would have to portray a much more subversive and threatening reality. *THE NIGHT THE LIGHTS WENT OUT IN GEORGIA* comes closest to showing working-class life as one in which working people are conscious of themselves as a group, and have resources for taking their own initiative and creating alternatives. The one room school in *COAL MINER'S DAUGHTER* and the celebration in *HONEYSUCKLE ROSE* represent older, disappearing ways of collective life, which are distant from the lives of most working people. The roadhouse in *THE NIGHT THE LIGHTS WENT OUT IN GEORGIA* is similar to the neighborhood bars of small towns and large cities, where people with similar experiences gather for shared leisure. Although Travis and Amanda are orphans and seem less socially rooted than Loretta Lynn or Buck Bonham, they actually become more rooted as they are integrated into this roadhouse community. Not yet successful, they are not very distinct from their audience. When performing, they are not just individuals expressing their pain but a core around which a group is formed. The music provides an arena of self-discovery and solidarity with a group; there individuals find themselves and each other. The freedom found in expressing strong emotions is not a lonely experience, it is mutual

pleasure. The friendship-work groups seen in *9 TO 5* and *TAKE THIS JOB AND SHOVE IT* are absent. But this community-in-leisure gives some indication of the possibilities of collective life beyond the family. It shows part of the ground that is necessary for other struggles and for the generation of new forms of living and new visions.

Although these films do not portray the full extent of discontent and creativity among working people, they do use country performers to express the dissatisfaction in the family and work shared by middle- and working-class people. Although people in different classes experience work and family life differently, family and work are images and symbols used across classes in much the same way. They can be used as specific terms, but they are also ambiguous ideas. In contrast to each other, work and family represent broad desires and dissatisfactions. The family, particularly the male-female couple, bears the burden of standing as a symbol for the desire for human relations. The idea of family is opposed to work relations where competition, production, and economic interests dominate. Although people in any class seldom experience the family as ideal, it continues to be a general way of talking about loving relations in units as small as the couple, or as large as the world. Work experience also varies between classes. The films' use of a country performer, a person with experience of both classes, to confront the middle-class dilemma of family versus career is only one indication of deep middle-class discontent. The critique of middle-class life from a person with working-class origins, who has known poverty and menial labor, seems the most powerful of all.

The use of working people and country performers to articulate middle-class needs and discontent distorts the lives of working people. However, it also reveals the potential of working people as a source of universal criticism and vision. Because *COAL MINER'S DAUGHTER*, *HONEYSUCKLE ROSE*, and *THE NIGHT THE LIGHTS WENT OUT IN GEORGIA* represent only a small part of a dialogue about working people, they only point to real-life conditions which generate discontent, aspirations, and creative attempts to find new solutions. Although in these films the working-class story becomes dominated by a middle-class problem, the films reinforce an image of working people as able to act as their own agents as well as the agents of others. The greatest potential in these films is that they lead viewers back to the music, to the lives of country performers, and to the experiences of working people where the denied reality can be recovered.

### The mammy in Hollywood film I'd walk a million miles — for one of her smiles

by Sybil DelGaudio

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“There are two kinds of females in this country — colored women and white ladies. Colored women are maids, cooks, taxi drivers, crossing guards, schoolteachers, welfare recipients, bar maids, and the only time they become ladies is when they are cleaning ladies.”[\(1\)](#)

According to political scientist Mae C. King, every political system has its myths.[\(2\)](#) These myths usefully justify the dominant principles of the society in which they were created. In the case of U.S. society, the dominant principle has been the caste system, a hierarchy of privileges and restrictions based largely on race. In both social mythology and in its reflection in U.S. cinema, white male power has been assisted by the maintenance of black female stereotypes. As King suggests, the caste system freezes social levels of status, opportunity, and privilege. It does this by ascribing inherited physical and mental characteristics to various castes and maintaining caste positions with whatever injustices and power iniquities have placed people there.[\(3\)](#) One way in which Hollywood cinema, our medium of social reaffirmation, has successfully reinforced the social hierarchy maintained by the U.S. caste system is in its presentation of the image of the Mammy.

The Mammy's image is inexorably linked to either the slave-society image of surrogate maternalism and domestic service (in the rearing and socialization of white children), or to the pernicious myth of black matriarchy (in the sole parenting of the fractured, father-absent black family). The Mammy has persisted as one of the few recurring images of black women on the screen. The strength of the stereotype has been greatly reinforced by the powerful iconography of her physical image, the recognizable character traits, the customary position of socio-economic dependency, and the consistently reappearing personae of such familiar black actresses as Hattie McDaniel and Louise Beavers.

Iconographically, the Mammy has usually appeared as, the dark-skinned Aunt Jemima, whose physical largess seemed capable of enfolding a substantial portion of white Southern society's children in her loving, maternal arms. The enormity of her size, while potentially increasing the image of her maternal strength, presented a de-sexualized image, especially contrasted with those sylphlike, objectified others of her gender who exemplified the feminine ideal. Such desexualization became further substantiated by the almost total non-existence of her own children, husband or lover. This familial isolation served to present the Mammy as a character who had, in effect, been spayed. Her apparent barrenness neutralized any latent power residing in her capacity for biological motherhood.(4)

Her character traits, ranging from unquestioningly loyal to warmly irascible, became fixed by the powerful performances of the women who played her. Whether it was the exceedingly faithful Louise Beavers in John Stahl's *IMITATION OF LIFE*, or the memorably contentious Hattie Mc Daniel in *GONE WITH THE WIND*, the Mammy image reflected the opposite of the myth of social mobility for blacks. As presented in Hollywood films, her image persists as a unique one of apparent strength for both blacks and women.(5) Yet if we look more closely at the structures in which this apparent strength is "allowed" by white culture — both in the larger social myth and in Hollywood cinema — we can see the limitations of the Mammy image and understand why this particular depiction of black power has remained largely unattacked by whites.

In reality, in the South the Mammy was an important figure in the socialization of white Southern children and the person to whom they often turned for affection and security. She was primarily concerned with the care of the children, relieving the mistress of the house of much of the difficult work connected with such care.(6)

The black Mammy, referred to as such to distinguish her from natural mothers of black children, was so closely associated with members of the white family that she has often been linked more closely with members of the white group than with members of her own race. According to Eugene Genovese, the slaves in the Big House had an advantageous position, and a reciprocal childcare agreement existed between Mammies and white women.(7) But what of her own children? Evidence of Mammy's own children is obvious because of her facility as a wet nurse. However, because of her enormous responsibility and devotion to white children, some black observers have accused the Mammy of neglecting her own in favor of those white children. W.E.B. DuBois described her as "one of the world's Christs ... she was an embodied Sorrow, an anomaly crucified on the cross of her own neglected children for the sake of the children who bought and sold her as they bought and sold cattle."(8)

Actually, this idea is more accurately an outgrowth of the myth that surrounds the Mammy, a myth that arose out of a desire to create, not



only the faithful soul, but also the supremely sacrificial slave. Thus, the characteristics attributed to the Mammy have become "standardized and institutionalized by sentiment," and have to do with her caretaker role for the whites' children. Her "virtues" were generally denied to other slave women, and she has been variously described as:

“self-respecting, independent, loyal, forward, gentle, captious, affectionate, true, strong, just, warm-hearted, popular, fearless, brave, good, pious, capable, thrifty, proud, regal, courageous, superior, skillful, tender, queenly, dignified, neat, quick, competent, possessed with a quick temper, trustworthy, faithful, patient, tyrannical, sensible, discreet, efficient, careful, harsh, devoted, truthful, neither apish nor servile.”[\(9\)](#)

Such extreme mythologized eulogies to black maternalism suggest that it may have been a white male fear of white Southern women's power which caused the transferring of maternal authority from white mothers to black surrogates in Southern plantation society. With that re-location, white patriarchal mythology has created the Black Mammy — powerful and strong, maternal and proud — yet distinctly under the control of paternalistic slave society.[\(10\)](#)

The maintenance of the Mammy myth affected not only white Southern womanhood, but black Southern manhood as well. The idea of the strong black matriarch has aroused controversy since the publication of Daniel Patrick Moynihan's denigrating report on black matriarchy. According to Robert Staples, the notion of black matriarchy carries with it connotations of power and dominance. But these connotations belie black women's oppressed status, from their original condition in the United States as chattel to their continued low status as the doubly oppressed today, both as blacks and as women. To burden the "matriarch" with other accusations, such as robbing the black man of his manhood, serves to foster the kinds of antagonisms in the black community that perpetuate the continued exploitation of the oppressed group, maintaining suspicion and divisiveness among its members.[\(11\)](#)

It seems clear that the creation and maintenance of the Mammy in Southern plantation society served a dual purpose. It removed any trace of power from white Southern women, and it contributed to the maintenance of a divisive family structure in which black males would have little or no power. As Angela Davis suggests, the slave system could not afford to acknowledge any symbols of authority, whether male or female, so the recognition of a matriarchal family structure seemed antithetical to attempts to eliminate any source of power which might eventually turn against the slave system.[\(12\)](#) The removal of the Mammy figure from her own family unit, and her re-location as surrogate mother in the Big House neutralized her own power and effectively killed two mother hens with one stone.

Eldridge Cleaver, in *Soul on Ice*, offered a contemporary analysis of sexual, racial and power relations in U.S. society:

“The myth of the strong black woman is the other side of the coin of the myth of the beautiful dumb blonde. The white man turned the white woman into a weak-minded, weak-bodied, delicate freak, a sexpot, and placed her on a pedestal; he turned the black woman into a strong, self-reliant Amazon and deposited her in his kitchen — that's the secret of Aunt Jemima's bandanna. The white man turned himself into the Omnipotent Administrator and established himself in the Front Office. And he turned the black man into the Supermasculine Menial and kicked him out into the fields.”(13)

All these myths, equally applicable to Hollywood films, suggest the persistence of images which have maintained power inequities between men and women. But the Mammy image, which reappeared so frequently in films, was one which served as the hub of a mythical wheel whose various spokes commemorated slavery far beyond its actual abolition. The culture fostered myths of black matriarchy and factious fantasies of denial and assimilation that were destructive to potentially secure family role-models.(14)

Hollywood films presented two, essential, garden-variety Mammy images. One was of slave society's historical Mammy, characterized by Hattie McDaniel in *GONE WITH THE WIND*. The other was her "liberated," domesticated sister, characterized by McDaniel, Beavers and others as the maid, servant, cook and faithful soul. This image supposedly emancipated the Mammy from her antebellum entrapment by a more equal positioning in the home of the white family.(15)

In fact, the post-emancipation Mammy's domesticity does not differ markedly from that of her slave sister. The Big House may have become the big house, but entrance into the mainstream of U.S. society would not come purely through the kitchen door. Historically, domestic service has forced black women to play some of the same roles they played during slavery. Often those who did not sign economically constrictive contracts to work in fields became domestic servants, exploited by some of the familiar techniques of oppression and dependency. Slavery was, after all, known as the domestic institution.(16) As W.E.B. DuBois argued,

“... (T)he Negro will not approach freedom until this hateful badge of slavery and medievalism (i.e., domestic service) has been reduced to less than ten percent.”(17)

Two of the most striking images of the domestic Mammy, supposedly removed from the restrictions of slave society, yet clearly reduplicating its conditions, are those presented by the two Hollywood versions of the Fannie Hurst novel, *Imitation of Life*. Both in perpetuating the myth in John Stahl's 1934 version, and in its questioning by Douglas Sink in 1958, the Mammy images and their filmic contexts serve to encapsulate the myriad myths associated with the Mammy figure. And their glaring

contrasts present significant distinctions between the tragic vision of Stahl's film and the ironic/critical vision of Sirk's.

John Stahl's 1934 version of *IMITATION OF LIFE* features Louise Beavers as Aunt Delilah, a reissued Mammy who, though similar in stature to McDaniel's slave, was less cantankerous and more emotionally ingenuous than her *GONE WITH THE WIND* counterpart. A large woman who went on force-feed diets to increase her size and her marketability as an actress, and who affected a Southern accent to mask her Los Angeles upbringing, Beavers literally studied and ate her way into the stereotype. The enormity of her physique became a physical manifestation of her character's social conditions and her own typecasting. If size is traditionally associated with strength, then this "mountain of a woman," as she is referred to in Stahl's film, subverts that stereotype. Her size becomes a metaphor for her own social immobility, in contrast to the svelte, lithe and upwardly mobile Bea (Claudette Colbert). Here also, the black Mammy, whose choices have been more rigidly circumscribed by conditions associated with slavery, frees the white mother of her maternal responsibilities. Delilah even ensures her own domestic fixed position, adding to the myth of black self-sacrifice by revealing her secret pancake recipe to her employer, Bea, who uses it to create a successful business. Beavers represents the perfect, faithful servant, unconcerned with her own success, completely content with servility. And her image, a smiling face crowned by a cook's hat, reaches iconic proportions, as it becomes a trade mark, stamped on boxes of flour and emblazoned on neon signs which publicly proclaim her domesticity.

Throughout the film, Delilah refers to herself as Mammy, a term which inflames her light-skinned daughter Peola (played by black actress, Fredi Washington), who has been trying to "pass for white." The retention of slave names; association with and responsibilities in the Big House (and the house becomes bigger and filled with more black servants as the pancake business booms); and the presence of a mulatto child, a biological reminder of the slaveholder's exercise of power and property rights over black women, who were raped at will by white slave-owners — all these serve to recreate conditions which serve as a mythic metaphor of slavery. Moreover, the film's presentation of an abridged, father-absent, black family highlights the myth of black matriarchy, leaving the unit more vulnerable to the compound fractures of denial and desired assimilation. Peola's misguided values lead to her ultimate tragedy of denial, and her mother dies of a broken heart. However, the film significantly does not end with Delilah's funeral. In a scene in which Bea prevents a parallel tragedy through an act of personal sacrifice,<sup>(18)</sup> Stahl shifts the final emphasis from the resulting tragedy to preventive action, from the larger causal issues of society and race to more avoidable problems of personal priority. The film ultimately prefers the comfort of 30s optimism to the agony of social reality.

Whereas parallels become signs of individualization and

particularization in Stahl's film, they become sources of irony and social commentary in Douglas Sirk's 1958 version. (Is re-make another source of Sirkian irony?) In Sirk's imitation of *IMITATION*, the Mammy image gets altered in a sign of the film's general fade to white. Here, the blacks are whiter, and the whites are blonder. The slim, barely Southern Juanita Moore plays the Mammy, while the sultry white Susan Kohner plays her daughter. Even the names have been de-Southernized. Aunt Delilah becomes Annie Johnson and Peola becomes Sara Jane. With platinum-haired Lana Turner as Lora Meredith, altered here from pancake queen to aspiring actress, and Sandra Dee as her bouncy blonde daughter, exemplifying American Pert, this film deals more critically than did its predecessor with the larger idea of assimilation. Sara Jane wants to be white, but Sirk questions that ideal through physical hyperbole. Since bloneness is, as Maureen Turim has suggested, a cultural fetish of a racist society,<sup>(19)</sup> then ultra-blonde puts Sara Jane's ideal out of reach, making imitation at its extreme — i.e., assimilation — impossible. Throughout the film, Sirk criticizes the ideal, and this critique extends to questioning in a broader way the false values of the society to which Sara Jane aspires.

As fake jewelry inundates the frame behind the titles, a Johnny Mathis sound-alike (Earl Grant) sings the title song, the lyrics of which proclaim, "Without love, we are merely living an imitation of life." These are Sirk's first clues to the missing elements and fraud. The world of false values is further highlighted by Lora Meredith's escalating wardrobe (from her opening babushka and calico to the \$78,000 array of gowns by Jean Louis) and Sara Jane's attempts to mimic the material signs of success, in garish, slinky sheaths which reek of bad taste. Lora's world of professional values is emulated as well, by Sara Jane, who performs in tawdry nightclubs, a mockery of Lora's counterfeit culture, of Lora's world of false theatricality. Both women fail to see themselves as they really are. Sirk's use of mirrors highlights their misapprehension. While Lora sees an unselfish mother, Sara Jane sees a "perfectly" white woman, but maternal devotion remains as elusive for the ambitious Lora as desired assimilation does for the myopic Sara Jane.

The culmination of Sirk's irony and criticism occurs in the film's final funeral scene. Depicting an exaggerated black ritual requested by Annie, it is the one scene in which Annie is placed in her own unique cultural context, detached from Lora. It suggests the existence of a rich life outside the big house, a life which has been filled with loyal friends. (Earlier, Lora expressed surprise at the existence of Annie's separate life, a life she was always too blind to ask about.) In filming the scene partly through frosted glass, a typical Sirkian distancing device, Sirk suggests the difficulty of understanding and grasping true happiness, and he laments the potential death of a rich culture threatened by misguided ideals. Sirk himself has summarized the way this film dealt with racial issues:

“The picture is a piece of social criticism — of both white and

black. You can't escape what you are. Now the Negroes are waking up to black is beautiful. IMITATION OF LIFE is a picture about the situation of the blacks before the time of the slogan 'Black is beautiful.'”(20)

While Sirk's own analysis of the film here indicates that the film's appeal was firmly rooted in the past, he downplays the film's powerful treatment of family relationships, particularly those of mother and daughter, which remain profound and relevant today.

Except for a few instances,(21) the Mammy has essentially disappeared from the screen since Annie Johnson's death. The growth of black pride created a new market for films made specifically for black audiences, and a shrinking market for films which perpetuated myths no longer acceptable to the increasing social consciousness of the 60s and 70s. Old stereotypes served as a glaring reminder to a society which was experiencing upheaval, and their commercialism was threatened by a burgeoning black audience, sensitized to relics of racist ideology.

For a while in the 70s, the elimination of old stereotypes encouraged the creation of new personae by such performers as Pam Grier, Diana Ross and Cicely Tyson. But iconographic alteration requires ideological commitment as well as commercial impetus. Total elimination seems easier to affect than risky redefinition. Black women have all but disappeared from Hollywood films (Pam Grier was recently relegated to a minor role in FORT APACHE, THE BRONX, in which she was reduced to a metaphor for the insidiously destructive forces of the ghetto). So what we are not seeing on the screen today seems, ironically, a commercial manifestation of the same myths of denial, assimilation and invisibility perpetuated by the Mammy image with which we were once so familiar.

## Notes

1. Gerda Lerner, ed., *Black Women in White America* (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 217.

2. Mae C. King, "The Politics of Sexual Stereotypes," *Black Scholar*, March/April 1973, p. 13.

3. King, p. 13.

4. Several films, including Ella Kazan's PINKY (1949) and both Hollywood versions of IMITATION OF LIFE (1934 and 1958), presented the Mammy with her own children. Both the Stahl (1934) and Sirk (1958) variations on the Fannie Hurst theme will be dealt with later.

5. Donald Bogle, in *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks* (New York: The Viking Press, 1973), contends that McDaniel and Beavers transcended the roles as written, giving a strength to the image which arose out of their own interpretations of the roles.

- [6.](#) Jessie W. Parkhurst, "The Role of the Black Mammy in the Plantation Household," *Journal of Negro History*, July 1938, pp. 351-352.
- [7.](#) Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (New York: Random House, 1972), pp. 354-55.
- [8.](#) W.E.B. DuBois, quoted in Genovese, p. 356.
- [9.](#) Parkhurst, p. 352.
- [10.](#) Angela Davis, in *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981) suggests that most black women did not even enjoy the ideological status traditionally associated with motherhood. Since slave women were considered more as breeders than as mothers, their value was assessed in terms of their fertility, and their maternal authority was effectively neutralized by the constant threat of the sale of their children (p. 7). The Mammy, on the other hand, had her power neutralized by diffusion and separation, removing her from her own family and resituating her in the Big House.
- [11.](#) Robert Staples, "The Myth of the Black Matriarchy," *Black Scholar*, January/February 1970, p. 8.
- [12.](#) Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *Black Scholar*, reprinted from 3:4, December 1971, in November/December 1981, p. 4.
- [13.](#) Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), p. 162.
- [14.](#) See Bogle's survey of Mammy images in *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks* for further examples.
- [15.](#) Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, p. 90.
- [16.](#) Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, p. 91.
- [17.](#) W.E.B. DuBois, quoted in Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, p. 98.
- [18.](#) Here Bea postpones her marriage to her fiancé, on whom Jessie has developed a serious crush.
- [19.](#) Maureen Turim, "Gentlemen Consume Blondes," *Wide Angle* 1:1 (revised and expanded), 1979, p. 58.
- [20.](#) John Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk* (New York: The Viking Press), p. 130.
- [21.](#) The reader is referred once again to Bogle, pp. 194, ff.



# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Saturday afternoons

by Martin Gliserman

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As much as anything the following personal film history is an invitation to its readers to write and share their own histories. By itself this piece is rather naked. It needs to be put in the context of many others where it can shed most of its individuality and line up with the themes and patterns of others. My fantasy is that many readers will find the idea interesting enough to respond by writing their own and that the editors of *Jump Cut* will be persuaded to publish their first book, entitled, perhaps, "Saturday Afternoons."

By way of preface let me say a few things about the purpose and value of such an enterprise. Our individual experience of going to the movies is at once personal, social, and political. I would like to explore the personal dimension of the audience's relation to film as one way of understanding some of the social and political implications of that relation. The value of writing one's own history and then seeing it in the context of others is much like other forms of consciousness raising. When personal responses are seen from the perspective of a larger group, the individual reaches a deeper understanding and critical awareness of his/her own experience. Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Herder and Herder: New York, 1972) offers us a complete description and illustration of the values and methods of this kind of "thematic investigation." Basically, people talk with each other about their responses to a shared cultural experience in order to grasp both individual and collective history in a non-alienating way. As Freire puts it, one objective is for

"the Subject to recognize himself in the object (the coded concrete existential situation) and recognize the object as the situation in which he finds himself, together with other Subjects" (p. 96).

The original context of this history was a course I developed, *Psychology and Cinema*. The first assignment I asked students to do was a film history (the directions for which are appended). Since it was the first time I had taught the course, I thought it best to do the assignment in

order to accomplish the following: to learn something of my own history, to have something to share with students, to model "experiential" discourse and validate its use in the learning process, and to see what kinds of difficulties emerged in doing the piece.

I did not assign or read the students' histories with the idea of analyzing them or writing about them. Thus, I do not have many useful generalizations to offer as examples of a thematic investigation. I was impressed by the almost ritual nature of the students' early film going — being dropped off and picked up, going with friends, going with the family to a drive in, eating popcorn, etc. At the same time, I was struck by individual responses — one student reported being very upset to learn on the way to her first movie that one was not supposed to talk during the showing. She made her father drive around the block at least three times while she tried to make up her mind. The value of reading all the histories was akin to reading books like Studs Terkel's *Working* or Robert and Jane Coles' *Women of Crisis*: I was learning about a dimension of cultural reality in an unalienated way.

.....

I have been going to the movies since the age of seven or eight. Most of my early ventures were fraught with anxiety. I went to a lot of westerns, not that I had much choice, where fights and chases were the center of energy. I worried a lot during these scenes. The films generated visceral anxiety — tightness in the gut and jaw, decreased blood flow to the extremities. The action in the film poised me to fight or flee, but there was no one to hit and nowhere to run. I was stuck in my chair, paralytic and clenched. The films must have resonated with my primitive wishes, fears, and prohibitions — about material goods, violence, revenge, getting caught. The basic plot situation was that someone (bad guy) took something from someone else (victim), and someone else again (good guy, savior cowboy) tried to right the wrong. Although the moral tale was played out as an interpersonal conflict, I can see now that I also "read" the conflict intra-psychically. It was not only the bad guy out there but also the bad guy inside me whom I wanted to get caught and punished.

It was usually on Saturday afternoons. We'd take a bus up to Broadway (Revere, Massachusetts). We? Kids from the neighborhood — "Hey, Ma, Kenny and Gary and Stewie are goin' to the movies, can I go too huh?" There was always some cartoon violence and humor — little creatures getting the best of big creatures after the big ones rather tormented the little ones — no doubt bad mommies and daddies getting what they deserved. In my case, the big creatures were also my older brother and some schoolyard bullies, whom I always aspired to beat up. He often took advantage of his five-year advantage and loved to scare me. Once he took me for a ride on the handlebar of his bike. He drove me down a long, steep hill — I was petrified. Once he took me to a movie. Initially I couldn't understand why he wanted to — it was a 3D movie about a magician. I was really frightened when the eerie-looking bats zoomed in



on me. I could almost feel the cobwebs in my face.

I also ate a lot of sugar, mostly in the form of Jujubes and Juicy Fruits. I'd suck and bite and chew and then stick my fingers in my mouth to get the pieces out of my teeth, etc. The eating intensified with the action and was an attempt to allay anxiety (I was an old-time thumb sucker), but the sugar, in fact, had its own course of action. When I got home, my mother, perceiving me to be in an odd mood, would ask if everything was OK. Like a good cowboy, I'd look serious and say nothing about my feelings. "Nah, everything's OK." Coming home, getting off the various highs, was like the end of a bad trip. But, of course, I couldn't stop going; there was something too good about it, all that excitement.

As I think about it, these early films were a kind of preteen sex — seeing dangerous things, gunfights and fistfights and chases and horses and big hats — and virtually no women. The price of the excitement was psychologically somewhat high: I felt a lot of frustrations and inhibitions as I left the movies and squinted in the daylight of concrete Broadway. I couldn't have a horse and was not likely to be a cowboy. I did not like the sadism of the bad guys (though I had my sadistic urges). I couldn't honestly identify with the heroes, and though I might wish I were one, I knew my skinny, unmuscled frame too well. That left me with the victim roles, which was uncomfortably passive — and not unlike being the viewer.

The next phase of movie going coincided with teenaged dating. I recall none of the films. The movies became a space rather than an event. I remember going to a drive-in on a double date to see TWO WOMEN, but I did not see more than the titles. When I had my license I went to the drive-in alone with a girl named Nancy; we didn't see anything either. The movies became a place to grope, one of the few places of its kind. There were endless kisses, but that's about all.

Serious movie going started in college, where I got involved through a friend, Paul Strong, with a film club, New Directions. The club was actually three faculty couples — Meaders, Wees, and Robertsons — and a small handful of students. The faculty arranged to get the films. The students helped make posters, hung them up, and collected money (\$.50) at the door. Afterwards, we went to someone's house, drank beer, and talked — renarrating and dramatizing favorite scenes, with some discussion of cutting, acting, and so forth. As much as anything, I enjoyed being with these faculty people — in fact, I'm still good friends with some of them. It made me feel older to be with them, and they were like a family to me. The films were mostly foreign — Fellini, Godard, Bergman, Kurosawa — and experimentals were shown as shorts — Baillie, Brakhage, Meader. The foreign films appealed to me a lot. I liked seeing people on screen with whom I could identify more. I wasn't a cowboy, I wore glasses. I wasn't all-American, I am thoroughly Russian Jew (assimilated, but ...). In foreign films people have noses that seem closer to my own; they make gestures I feel akin to; they are not typically beautiful but seem more ordinary. I liked the styles of clothes and

housing. Everyone wasn't rich. My appreciation was also a way of rejecting the fraternity scene, the American way, my "boring" middle-class family, the bourgeois roots that were spreading. It was, as well, a form of snobbery, for I often failed to understand the films though I might pretend otherwise. I was trying these films on — Marty Belmondo, Sven Gliserman. It was often the music of the movie that grabbed me and, as I see in retrospect, misled me — I think of SHOOT THE PIANO PLAYER or JULIET OF THE SPIRITS.

I have since that time seen many of the films again, and I realize how little I grasped. I don't recall talking about how I felt about the films beyond a "boy, that was good" or "I really liked that part where ..." I don't recall making meaning so much as reliving the narrative. I did begin to understand that the movies took me over. They invaded my sense of self, changed my mood, made me want to act out and redramatize the hero's attitudes. I did not go deep enough into self-consciousness to understand its context.

This would be a less than truthful account if sexuality weren't mentioned. Foreign films seemed much more advanced in regard to sexuality. There would often be a sexually explicit scene — meaning, generally, that a woman's breasts would be exposed to view. I found this very exciting. When there was love in these movies, it wasn't just mushy — it was physical. My college experience made me into an addict. The experience was surrounded by good things — older people who took me seriously, being with the woman I wanted to marry (and did), exposed to a vision of the world that gave me new role models, aesthetic values, and sexual excitement. The overall concern of these films seemed more psychological and existential than those I had known earlier, and there was much less violence. I did not comprehend the universe they showed me, but I was learning how to see.

In graduate school there was little money and less time. We didn't have a television and Bloomington didn't bring many interesting new films to the Von Lee cinema. There were film series which allowed us to see some classics, but we were pressed for time. I recall walking out of BONNIE AND CLYDE because of its violence. There was a man in the back of the theater yelling, "Viet Nam, it's fuckin' Viet Nam." Once we got to New Jersey, we went to New York and saw many new films as they opened. This had its "status," of course, like reading the latest John Barth novel or whatever. New York is full of "first on the block" experiences or "one of a kind" experiences, and when we came "back East" we were hungry for these bourgeois treats. LAST TANGO IN PARIS was one of those "first-run" films. I felt speechless after seeing it; there were many disturbing scenes and issues in it — sexual, death struggles, madness, and loss. It was one of the last films I saw with my wife, who died in 1973. Seeing the film again, alone, and knowing more about death, the film gave me some perspective on my own pain and confusion, lust and anger.

Being "single," I pushed myself to go to the movies alone. It wasn't quite

as much fun, but in the city it did not feel strange because many people do it. The movies became a place to go with "dates" — they gave us something to talk about, provided an experience to work on. I know that I measured people by the post-film talks we'd have. And I measured films by how often they became a point of reference. I have recently been married again, so I've been going to films with the same person for several years. This is something wonderful since films provide a thematic reference; they enrich our lives.

I like to see many kinds of movies, but some I deeply enjoy — those which resonate with my values in some way: I think of CHINATOWN, BREAKER MORANT, MAX HAVELAAR, and THE CHINA SYNDROME. I would have to say that I enjoyed seeing SUPERMAN; it is a fun fantasy and one that brings back an "old-time" set of recollections. I cried, laughed, held my breath, caught a glimpse of Lois Lane through her flimsy dress. But it's like a hot fudge sundae; I couldn't live off it. Kukrosawa's KAGEMUSHA, on the other hand, I found deeply satisfying. The genre — a samurai drama — is not one I'd pick as a favorite. But the film was beautiful and rich — I'd see it again (I've seen it four times) to look at the kimonos and the gestures, to hear the voices.

There are varieties of films I stay away from — sex exploitation, kung fu, etc. I look for directors and actors I like. I'm interested in what comes out of different countries — Japan, Italy, Germany, France, South America. Film broadens horizons by shrinking them; people are people, conflicts are conflicts. I have seen a number of sex films — DEEP THROAT, THROUGH THE GREEN DOOR — but find that the excitement is contraindicated by the self-consciousness one feels (to say nothing of the politics). It is difficult to make love after seeing them without feeling that I'm making a movie rather than participating in a human event involving me and someone else. What I like in a film is earned excitement — fear, anguish, sexual arousal — as opposed to cheap thrills. I like buildup, slow, ironic, digressive. I enjoy nonstop comedy, too, slapstick, racy — I laughed a lot at UP IN SMOKE. And certainly when I was single, Woody Allen became an ever-present and benign alter ego, always ready with a smile.

Movies are a form of news, too. They tell me what kinds of social forces and feelings are around or are being exploited. They define an atmosphere, an attitude, a set of moods. I got a cable channel (The Movie Channel) so I could catch things I wouldn't be likely to see (as well as to see things again), just to keep up with the news. It's fun to see directors stealing ideas from others and doing a lousy job for a cheap thrill — e.g., the number of "scary" shower scenes... The contrasts give me more appreciation. Watching movies at home, I often shut off the sound so I can sharpen up my "technical" eye.

One film that had an interesting impact on me was Warhol's X-rated FRANKENSTEIN, a 3D spoof (which is now returning to the screen as an R-rated film). It was so graphic — there was so much bodily viscera making its way to about three inches of my face — that I had to say,

"This is a movie. These are tricks." The film gave me an experience that allowed me to see that I was in a funhouse, and that gave me an important kind of distance from the experience. I tended to merge in movies (and elsewhere as well). The ability to do so seems important — i.e., to let oneself go — but it isn't the only modality of relationship. Films still grip me — THE NEEDLE'S EYE left me exhausted from anxiety — but I feel free to choose.

What do these recollections and responses add up to? — On one level going to the movies is personal. I go to be meditatively engaged and yet to be excited, aroused, satisfied, sobered. I love to look, to see beauty, to see forms change. I go to wrestle with my anxieties." The movies are a kind of temple — away from daily routine, into a different order of experience, though one that reflects back onto daily routine. In some analogous way. I take them seriously, but I feel their play. I go to exercise my feelings and sharpen my "vision." After all, in a lot of my daily work my feelings don't have free reign; they have to be held back and transformed. For example, I may feel angry with a student, but it may not be pedagogically useful to deal with that, so it has to be suspended. Spontaneous feeling often has to be checked out and clarified by a more reflective part of the self. The danger of this habit is that we might end up forgetting our feelings altogether. We might forget, for example, that driving on the Garden State Parkway is dangerous, that the Lincoln Tunnel is noxious, that the administration of the academy does not care about teaching, that the weapons trade is unconscionable. In the movies the movement of my feelings is not hampered; letting them stretch in many directions is simply healthy.

Going to the movies is usually a social event. I go with others to get into something about which I don't have to "do" anything, to share a cultural event with people I like. I like to talk about the movies — to find out how we as individuals saw the action, how we felt about it, what it was that we did see, why we felt as we did, and if we might change our sense of things. In talking about movies I learn about other people (and myself through them). The film is a pattern by means of which I make new patterns with other people. Part of the change, then, I can see, is that as a youngster I desired to act on or act out the drama of the film, but as an adult I want to talk about it. Where the film was a private and anxious experience, it has become an interpersonal, shared, and facilitating experience. Writing about film going, as in this remembrance, widens the experience one more rung — with the hope of pushing the psychological (private politics) toward the political (collective psychology). All in all, this brief remembrance would serve best when washed in the pool of other responses — so please write one.

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Appendix: Assignment — a personal history of movie going. This paper on your personal history will establish some of the basic motivations for, and the personal-social context of, going to the movies. The following questions are primers for developing the history. Why do you go to the

movies? (Keep asking this question to find answers on various levels.)  
What do you recall about your earliest experiences at the movies (with whom? when? about what)? With whom do you often go to the movies?  
How come you enjoy going to the movies? What do you expect from a movie? What do you want? What do you most enjoy seeing, looking at, in movies? What do you least enjoy? What might prompt you to go to a given movie? Do you have a particularly favorite film? Can you explore why the film has power for you?

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### Interview with Pancho Adrienzen Radical film in Peru today

by Buzz Alexander

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Pancho Adrienzen is a Peruvian free-lance photographer, film critic for the prominent leftist weekly *Marka*, and co-editor of the film magazine, *Cinematógrafo*. He has made videotapes on the history of Peruvian working class struggle and on the fifth national congress of the Peasant Confederation of Peru in 1978. His films include two shorts which have been shown nationally. One is CORREO CENTRAL (CENTRAL POST OFFICE). It is a film about the importance of correspondence as a form of communication, in which a hidden camera observes tourists, peasants, students and others in the post office. Letters by Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci, and Simon Bolivar are part of the commentary. His other film is DANIEL CARRION, about a Peruvian doctor who discovered the inoculation for smallpox.

The interview here is a composite of two meetings, carried out on two occasions in 1979 — in May by Buzz Alexander and in December by Chuck Kleinhans and Julia Lesage. Buzz transcribed, translated, and edited this combined interview, in consultation with Chuck and Julia.

#### NOTE ON PERU IN THE 1970s

In October 1968, President Fernando Belaúnde Terry was ousted in a military coup and succeeded by General Juan Velasco Alvarado. Velasco's government was one of contradictions. It combined nationalizations; recognition of Cuba; agrarian, educational, and labor reform; Third Worldist rhetoric and behavior; repression of the working class; and imposition of an enormous foreign debt which led the country into a severe recession. The left was split by these contradictions, with the Peruvian Communist Party and other elements supporting the regime while others vehemently opposed it. In August 1975, General Francisco Morales Bermúdez replaced Velasco and led the country rightward. By 1977 the country had entered a depression and was subjected to "stabilization" measures by the International Monetary Fund: devaluation of the sol, a high rate of inflation, and harsh

restriction of wage increases. The period was marked by growing labor militancy, including general strikes in 1978 and 1979; by the election of a constitutional assembly in 1978; and finally by new elections in 1980, with Belaúnde returning to power. The left parties united temporarily, but tragically and irresponsibly they split just before the elections, and so fared very poorly.

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*JUMP CUT: Describe the formation of your group.*

Pancho Adrienzén: We came together to project films. In 1970 repression in the universities was very severe. The only way for students to organize politically was through clubs where they could link cultural and political work: film clubs, theater clubs, song clubs, and so on. Through the film clubs we could help students grow in their political consciousness by showing Cuban, Chinese, and Soviet films. But we always intended that our work reach beyond the university. From the beginning we showed films three or four times a week in unions and *barriadas* (poor communities circling Lima). We never exhibited films just for the love of films but clearly understood the political usefulness of such work.

Our film exhibition project originally started out from a mass-based, neighborhood, organizing project in a *barriada*. Showing films let us get people together and carry out activities that would keep people thinking of themselves as active social agents. The project let us, as a group, work collectively. The films chosen served to highlight various social problems, show other countries' realities, and demonstrate — in a small but very important way — that there is another kind of cinema. People also have to learn to look at commercial film with other eyes.

*What was the political stance of your group?*

Our vision of the world was Marxist, but we had members from different political groups. We never privileged any international line or position. We were in reality a broad political front. For all of us the fundamental factor was that the epoch of President Velasco was a reformist epoch: there would be no basic structural changes. Our effort was to help citizens of the *barriadas* and workers to organize independently and not succumb to the reformist propaganda of the government. It was this effort that united us and motivated us to work, and it is an effort we have been carrying out for almost ten years now. We want to use film as a weapon, as a way to forge independent, popular organizing and peoples coming to consciousness. Two films which we have distributed a lot come closest to our way of thinking: Eisenstein's *OCTOBER* and a Cuban film by Manuel-Octavio Gomez about the literacy campaign, *HISTORIA DE UNA BATALLA*. The work in the university above all helped us to form a core group of politically committed, technically competent people.

*Have you changed your strategies over the years?*

Yes. In the beginning it was rather dispersed work, based on individual initiative and good will. After a while we became more organized, forming a group which took on responsibilities that obligated each of us to commit ourselves to the plan of work. We had weekly meetings where we discussed the political side of what had gone on, evaluated our activities, and planned new projects. Sometimes we even met two or three times a week — almost continuously. Many of us also became interested in aspects of production, in taking photographs and trying some filming.

There was another development. At first a union would invite us to show a film for its anniversary or because it needed to raise funds or for some other reason. But we soon became dissatisfied with this process. We would show a film, a lot of people would come, there would be a political discussion about film, then people would go home. There was no follow through. And the unions did not get a lot of support because the whole thing was very sporadic and did not lead to any constant progression in the political consciousness of the working class. So we decided that every time a union invited us, we would commit them to a cycle of four or six films, shown in the same location and with a certain political rationale. For example, we could project a series on countries that had suffered repression, or countries that had struggled for liberation: Vietnam, China, Cuba, and the Soviet Union. We also learned from this experience to apply the same policy in the *barriadas*.

We learned at the same time to hold preliminary discussions with union and community leaders, so that they would understand the importance of each film. Thus, they were the ones who always presented the films and led the discussions. This is how we collaborated in the organizing of unions. From 1970 to 1973-1974, a great number of unions were formed in Peru, class-conscious unions. With these film projections we assisted in organizing those unions.

*Did you work with any particular political organization?*

We have worked with all the political organizations on the left: organizations opposed to right parties such as APRA and Acción Popular or SINAMOS (Sistema Nacional de Apoyo á la Movilización Social — the government's branch intended to organize peasant collectives and other local units). And we have refused to work in places where left organizations were in conflict. We were once asked to show a film in a place where two groups were contending for control in very competitive, partisan terms, with a political line very distanced from popular reality and not thinking of what was best for the people at all. So, we did not go. Our purpose is to support the development of leftist organizations in sectors where there is class-consciousness of a struggle against the organizations of the right and of the government.

*Were there differences in your work in the unions and in the *barriadas*?*

Yes, we showed different kinds of films and varied the manner of



presentation. A very political, very revolutionary film, like Eisenstein's OCTOBER, had impressive success in the unions. I recall that during times of conflict, of miners' strikes, people responded to OCTOBER as if it showed them the road. Such showings really made a great impression on me. They were euphoric. People would come out like ... Well, if a soldier or a police car had passed by just then, they could have burned it! But films like OCTOBER, which implied a certain political development in the viewer, would not produce the same effect in barriadas or peasant communities. So for them we turned to films with mainly social content, like Buñuel's LOS OLVIDADOS. We would take films borrowed from embassies, the French or Czech embassy, for example. Or Cuban films, like Tomás Gutierrez Alea's THE TWELVE CHAIRS, not political, but rich in social content. We used Chaplin often. His films permit a lot of social commentary and attract a large crowd. We'd begin with such films in a series and end with others that elicited — a more strictly political discussion.

*Describe if you can a discussion resulting from one of these showings. How would people discuss a Chaplin film?*

We'd often begin with comparisons. Compare, for example, the Chaplin film with contemporary feature films or television soap operas. Different kinds of plots favor different kinds of characterizations. In many of his films Charlie Chaplin plays a vagabond, a poor person, or someone dominated by others — but his films also have a message of hopefulness. We want people to be able to criticize mainstream cinema so as to create a public for alternative, political cinema.

Sometimes we work through churches, who have the projection apparatus and the locations, and who let organized groups, clubs, and associations run the meetings.

*Does the church support the left?*

Institutionally, not so much, but pastors feel they have to. The state clearly acts in a hostile way towards ordinary people, and the pastor either has to be on the side of the state or on the side of the people. Sometimes we block off a street to show a film, sometimes we put up a screen after mass and the people stay after church. The churches have also been very advanced in preparing filmstrips with cassette tapes and so have exhibition facilities for those.

*What kinds of repression have you faced and how have you dealt with it?*

Well, we advertise these as cultural events, run by a local organization. Right-wing parties and many religious groups have cultural events in the barriadas, too. By working with established political groups, we have had minimal public visibility, both personally and organizationally. This gave us a lot of security, and gave our equipment and films protection too. And if we would go into an area like the sierra, where there was a miner's strike, and therefore severe police repression — including the

thorough searching of cars between cities or on the one road leading into town — we would travel separately from the films and projector. But while we were going to exhibit films to fishermen in the big national fishing industry strike, the police confiscated one of our three projectors and before returning it, took off an arm, which we have never been able to replace. For that reason, we will never travel with a projector again, only with films. And for other reasons, too, we have decided to center our activities in Lima and not disperse ourselves. For a while I was projecting films almost every day, often in two different places each Saturday and Sunday. It caught up with me, and we can't let activism damage us like that.

Really our film showings have always been political, not aesthetic, events. We show films to bring out issues, to increase leftist understanding, for example, of workers in the middle of a unionizing drive. Our film showings give support to the leftists working within the union. The film and the discussion after it increase rank and file consciousness about left politics or a left political analysis. This is one of the reasons why we always have a preview screening and a mini-discussion beforehand with the group's leaders and then have that group present the film to its own people — a double process of cinematic and political education.

Our main political goal is to increase political awareness and class-consciousness among ordinary people. It is only education and pressure from the base that will force unity on the left and keep the left parties from just fighting among themselves. When there was a Constitutional Assembly, the over thirty left parties that have sprung up since the Velasco era did not consult with their popular base on proposals for the Constitution, not even with the base of their own party. The left parties were heavily criticized by the masses for that, and many of them seem to be responding more to the people's demands.

One of our members belonged to a left party. But when he went around projecting films to every workers' organization and left-organized community project in Lima, he saw the limits of his own group. Economic changes in Peru have been so drastic, and left parties have been so backward in keeping up with these changes, that just opening your eyes and talking constantly to people is an important step. It lets you get information and see what the situation is. This is why our group has always basically been a communications group.

*In the barriadas, how many would come for the projections and how many would remain for the discussions?*

We average 150 to 200 persons, because in the barriada people love film, and because the films we show are very cheap, five to ten cents. Sometimes we don't charge. When we do charge, it's just enough to pay for our taxi or for someone to carry the projector, and to have a little fund to buy a new bulb for the projector and so on. We get some support from friends to repair the films and help with costs. This does not help us get ahead with our own film work, but our purpose is to take the films

to people at an affordable rate.

About half the crowd will stay on for the discussion. Usually a very small percentage of the people speak. You find the same fear as in the university cinema clubs, the fear of not being a cinema specialist and therefore not knowing enough to contribute. Where there is broad political development in a zone, then there is greater participation, because people see the connection of the film to their collective work.

Sometimes, people don't meet our expectations in reacting to a film. We showed LUCIA (Humberto Solás, Cuba 1968) quite a bit in 1972 and 1973. We expected people to like the third episode best, but they liked the second, because there was more action. Regrettably, many of them would praise the husband for dominating his wife in the third episode. With MANUELA (Solás, 1966) they would be enamored of the action and romance and little more.

In the unions, it was different. Participation was much greater, because the workers have political preoccupations and well-formed opinions. And they would focus on class struggle itself, the nature of armed struggle, say, in LUCIA and MANUELA. Projecting films at their political meetings usually results in their taking up distinct positions in the discussion afterward. Their debate is much richer.

#### THE POLITICS OF FILMMAKING IN PERU

*You told us earlier that in 1975 there was a conjunction of very favorable factors for the film movement in Peru. Could you tell us about that period?*

Yes, I'll need to give you a little background first on the Film Law and censorship. Peruvian cinema as it is now began with the Film Law in the early months of 1973. We had film before that, but no support for it. You could not produce shorts, because there was no place they could be exhibited. The new law stimulated the production of a great quantity of shorts [by means of a tax rebate — trans. note]. But there is a problem. Look at the films from the first year after the law. They are of three types. There are auteur films, like those of Robles Godoy, and films to make money, including industrial films. Then there's EL CARGADOR/ THE PORTER, about a foot-carrier of heavy loads in the Andes. This documentary study by Lucho Figueroa is a film with a certain social interest, showing Peruvian reality. The vast majority of the shorts then and since have been of the second type.

The problem for filmmakers like Figueroa was and is censorship. Censorship occurs in two stages in Peru. First the films are qualified for adults or minors. The films then go to the Commission for Promotion of Film (COPROCI) to receive authorization to exhibit, another form of censorship. If a film passes the first censorship, but is denied authorization for theater exhibition, it can still be shown in film clubs, unions, and schools. Nora de Izcue's RUNAN CAYCU, for instance, a film about peasant struggles leading up to The Agrarian Reform Law of

1969, did not pass the first stage and so cannot be shown publicly under any circumstances. Ñawi (Eye) Cinematic Production's EL FOTÓGRAFO DEL PARQUE/ PARK PHOTOGRAPHER is a documentary film on the itinerant salespeople, the food sellers, beggars, and so on, who make up the reality of University Park in Lima. It was passed at the first stage but not at the second (until two years later).

So producers become frightened. They don't want to invest in films with social themes. In spite of this, some filmmakers still insisted on making films about social problems, but they were censored or denied the right to exhibit. Examples are Izcue's RUNAN CAYCU; Fico Garcia's HUANDO, a film about a strike by workers at the Hacienda "Huando"; and TIERRA SIN PATRONES/ LAND WITHOUT LANDLORDS, a film documenting peasant struggles up to the Agrarian Reform Law of 1969. Other censored works include the group Liberación sin Rodeos' (Liberation without Detours') UNA PELICULA SOBRE JAVIER HERAUD / A FILM ABOUT JAVIER HERAUD, on the Peruvian poet-guerrilla killed in 1963); and NIÑOS CUSCO/ CHILDREN OF CUSCO, a film about Andean peasant children.

This situation, which began in 1973, had certain consequences in the ideological and political terrain. Film people began to organize to protest against the outrages of the state, against the censors, and against COPROCI. The workers organized to combat the film companies; in 1974 they formed the Union of Film Industry Workers (SITEIC). At the same time, the workers in distribution and exhibition formed the Federation of Film Workers (FETCINE). Simultaneously came the famous transference of the newspapers from private and wealthy owners to the government, in July of 1974. Those of us who wrote for the film magazines *Hablemos de cine* and *Cinematógrafo* went to work as critics for the newspapers. We had access to a medium that before had been closed. This access, together with the organization of the film workers and their conflict with the government and the industry, permitted us to open a wide debate about Peruvian cinema. This debate lasted throughout 1975 and into the early months of 1976. Its fundamental issue was how to give political content to Peruvian film.

*What kind of problems did people in production have?*

A fundamental problem was that their films were not approved by COPROCI. They could not make the films they wanted to. Then there were labor problems for those working for companies: low salaries, sporadic and infrequent working hours, no right to work, no life security, and so on. People working in distribution and exhibition are still very exploited. They do not have stable work, and the government refuses to recognize their union.

The various production workers, the critics, and the actors' union reached the point of uniting in a Front for the Defense of the National Cinema. This Front entered into a lengthy discussion over how to take up the struggle for a national cinema, a *cine popular*, a cinema which expressed the interests of the majority. This discussion had a basic

political and ideological purpose, the defense of freedom of expression.

It sounds good, but we in the Front had problems and committed serious errors. For instance, there was infighting between groups of different tendencies in the Front, and we failed to arrive at a correct political direction. We identified two fundamental enemies: North American business with its control of the film market; and the state, which being capitalistic and bourgeois defends its interests through a castrating censorship which cuts off all initiative and development.

If we understand correctly, this is part of a general national situation. The state subsidizes multinational companies and makes it very difficult for native industry to develop on its own. It's a situation which creates unemployment and underemployment at many levels.

Yes, it is the same. Our problem was that we had identified the enemies to strike, but we had no consensus on whom to strike first. A related problem was that we did not agree on our orientation. The film critics thought we needed to develop an ideology for the movement before further developing its politicization, although that should be happening simultaneously as well. Others believed the opposite, and for them it was most important to attack North American imperialism directly through the multinational companies. In addition, the movement did not actually advance much beyond pure initial emotion, an emotion without perspective, on the struggle.

*But there was a strike at this time, wasn't there?*

Yes, we carried out various actions. The FETCINE people had strikes, which received a decent amount of support. Juan Bullita and I published two sections in our Sunday page in the *Correo*. One contained authentic Marxist film criticism plus commentary and news. In the other we addressed problems in the cinema movement. We published the communications of the unions and federations. We reported their struggles with the censors. This we did from July of 1974 until November or December of 1975. There were also projections of films, discussions of a political and ideological type, and marches and demonstrations by film people.

*And production?*

No. We lacked production for various reasons. First, film people's political and ideological development was very weak, and continues to be very weak. Second, in the vacuum of opportunity for our development, we had few technical groups capable of producing political films. Those who intended to make political film lacked resources and equipment. Third, the left faced a series of discrepancies. The Revolutionary Vanguard and the Revolutionary Communist Party, for example, did not agree at all. Red Fatherland could not agree with the Revolutionary Left Movement. As a result of this very marked sectarianism, the few people in film who wished to make political film found little consistent support. It was difficult to form crews. There were

some experiences in super-8, but very limited work at the bases, for one or another union. SITEIC turned out one number of a newsreel, but that was all.

There were a few films. Nora de Izcue made RUNAN CAYCU (in 1973, but the battle over whether it should be exhibited lasted into 1974-1975). Liberación sin Rodeos made a film on Javier Heraud, the guerrilla poet, an honest but sentimental film without a real leftist point of view. The group Liberación sin Rodeos tried to make other films, including an interesting project on black slaves in Peru in the nineteenth century, but did not finish them. Then there was Bruma Films, a group of Chileans and Peruvians who came from Chile after the coup in 1973. They had a good amount of political maturity and clarity. They made a rather important film, TEATRO EN LA CALLE/ STREET THEATER in 1974 about the street theater actor Jorge Acuña in Lima, and a film called VIA PÚBLICA, about the itinerant salespeople of Lima. They also made two other shorts, EN CADENAS/ MY CHAINS about a barriada, and NECESITA MUCHACHA/ MAID NEEDED about domestic employees.

So there wasn't much political production. And this limited our discussion. It was also limited by the fact that we were mainly fighting for democratic conditions within the system's structure of production, and we were not planning alternate cinema at the system's margins.

*Why this last limitation?*

The main reason was the filmmakers' ideological weakness. The majority of FETCINE who wanted to make films did not want to make a political commitment. So they might think of films that were slightly radical, but within the system. In short, they were not militants.

*So what happened to the movement of 1974-1975?*

Because of the debate over whom to strike first, because of the uncertainty whether to start with the ideological or political, and because of the lack of accord between various sectors, including the industry and critics, the government was able to carry out a very effective maneuver in 1975. It created a commission to compose a new general law for the film industry, for production, distribution, exhibition, cinema clubs, everything to do with film. It sent out a call to distributors, producers, workers, actors, and critics to help plan the law. It tricked us: the endeavor immobilized us. All of our forces were channeled into this new law. We met every afternoon four or five times a week for six months, piled up papers full of projects, and all for a law that never saw the light of day, that the government never intended to enact.

At the same time, the union entered into a political struggle against the company owners at a time when the union's forces were insufficient. It went on strike and its members were fired. It also fought legally, with a grievance to the Ministry of Labor, and it lost there too. The government first recognized the union, then decided not to recognize it. Part of the

problem was that the union lacked clear political and ideological preparation. There was too much infighting, and it is said that Revolutionary Vanguard used the union for its own political ends. The result was that the union entered a period of political crisis and dissolved.

The critics also had contradictions that we still haven't resolved. These contradictions made it difficult for us to deal with the increasingly tougher newspaper censorship, in 1976, under the more rightist government of General Morales. All of this added up, and the film movement failed. Most filmmakers now do not want anything to do with the word union, because of the failure of this movement.

*But for a year now there has been an Association of Filmmakers. We realize that it also was organized by the government, by COPROCI.*

Yes, another trick, partly intended to be divisive. The original union included film workers of all kinds, including independent workers, who work part time or work by contract for small companies. Most of the workers in the industry are independent workers. But there are also those called the filmmakers: the qualified technicians, the directors, the producers, in other words the petite bourgeoisie, well paid and considered above the workers. Government functionaries utilized this division, wooing the better-paid group with promises of greater production liberties and better exhibition possibilities.

This brings us to July 1977, when COPROCI organized a seminar of filmmakers, not workers, to evaluate Peruvian Cinema and to present a series of proposals for new laws to the government. Somewhat wiser this time, a group of left filmmakers, and critics used the seminar for our own purposes. We prepared our own proposals. For example, in the area of censorship, we proposed that films from all countries be allowed to enter Peru, that COPROCI not be a censorship body composed of technicians and functionaries of the state, that it not have representatives from the armed forces, that it have representatives from among the critics and film people. The entire series of proposals had to do with democratic liberties. It was well planned, very well organized, and our proposals carried the day. We also got an agreement among the participants that the government had to respond in sixty days to our accords. This was all very fine. But in fact the government complied with none of our proposals. The only one they complied with, aside from a minor concession, was creation of the Association of Filmmakers.

*And what kind of body is the Association? Do you belong?*

No, I do not belong. It exists under the government. The people who did form it have hopes that it will help build the Peruvian film industry. For them, that means collaborating with COPROCI and avoiding political and ideological discussion. They think that if they develop the industry, then they will be able to make more progressive films.

I believe this is the government's game to demobilize film people, stifle

their politicization, and stop them from even beginning to make films with progressive content. Films now are technically very professional, yet they have no analysis of reality, representation of contradictions. Most of our filmmakers are turning their backs on their country. The Association perspective is mistaken. It means no ample debate over the possibilities and realities of Peruvian cinema. For two years now — since the seminar — no one has wanted to discuss anything about Peruvian cinema. If the Association's notions prevail, they will always think political cinema lies somewhere in the future. Yet political knowledge can only come through struggle.

*In making films that reach the theaters for two, three, four years, when the time comes to make political films about Peruvian reality, they will not know how to do it.*

Right! Last year, 1978, was a year never seen before in the history of Peru, rich in popular struggles: the strike by SUTEP (the national teachers' union), strikes by the miners, national campaigns for the Constitutional Assembly, the land seizures. And the filmmakers were not present. A few of us were there, but we lack the experience of those who have worked more consistently in film, and we do not have their economic resources.

#### A POLITICAL FILMMAKING PROJECT

*What can you tell us about the film your friends are working on now?*

It records the struggles of a *barriada* here in Lima, its effort to gain political recognition and to prevent SINAMOS from interfering in its affairs. The *barriada* was formed in 1974, and at the end of 1977 the residents undertook a redistribution of the zone. Let me explain. When land is first invaded on the outskirts of a city, everyone grabs their own piece of land. Afterwards, when everything is more or less organized, then the space becomes redistributed and shared according to the necessities of each person. This took place in 1977 independently of the government, through the people's good will. A friend who works and lives in that *barriada* contacted a friend of mine, and he went out to film the redistribution, because the people wanted a record of how it was actually done. So, without any greater perspective, he shot a little over a half hour, on how they organized the houses, how they live, and a few other things like a small police tank arriving to obstruct their work, some marches in the zone. But he had no precise idea of what to do with the material. He financed this half-hour with the aid of friends who gave him some outdated film still in good condition. And he had, as is always the case, the backing of friends, film technicians who could give him access to labs and equipment, and so on. After the filming, a German group that had come to Peru contributed some money, so my friend and his collaborators were able to make a positive answer print.

The next step was to show their material to the people of the *barriada*. They wanted the residents' opinions, wanted to know from them what to do with the material. They cut out the bad shots, put a certain order to



it, and made a more or less parallel sound track on cassette tape. They projected it twice, first for the community leaders, about fifty people, and then for the entire community. Technically, the material is not very good; they did not have light meters, used hand-held camera, and so on. But this was not important to the audience. The film made a strong impression on them, not only because of their excitement at seeing themselves on film, but also because they saw a segment of their struggle. With high participation and after considerable discussion, they asked from the filmmakers a history of that *barriada* from start to present.

So they went forward, interviewing different sectors of the population on how they organized to take the land. There is one twelve-minute interview with a family who were involved in a confrontation with the police. My friend also filmed more material on living conditions in the zone, more interviews on present conditions and problems.

Significantly, in this struggle, the entire population participated and it was a big battle — with people wounded, kidnapped, and killed.

*What do they show of the struggle? How will they show it?*

They were able to get photographs of a moment of the struggle, of one very important struggle in particular, where during a strike three people, including two children, were killed in a confrontation with the navy.

*How are they going to render the struggle politically?*

Politically, there are a number of factors. First, they make it clear in the film that this *barriada* is typical; they show that the same conditions exist elsewhere in Peru. Second, they examine a particular popular movement, which is exemplary and inspiring. Third, they consider it important that the people who carried out the struggle have seen the film and contributed to its form and content. Fourth, they show the state's economic and political interest in having people continue to live under these conditions and in insuring that *barriadas* do not organize independently from the state, from SINAMOS. This is one of the few peasant-migration *barriadas* which won its battle against SINAMOS, which got construction money on its own terms. And, fifth, in opposition to the state, they show the break from SINAMOS; they show the importance of the *barriada*'s being organized independently and acting together to choose its own destiny. This is more or less the film's central idea.

*What stage is the film at now?*

They have about two hundred feet more to film, some details, another interview or so, and then the editing. They have sufficient financing now to finish the film in the next half year. They are experiencing a little difficulty in the *barriada* itself. As a result of the killings, the people have withdrawn a little, and it has a new directorship. But they do not expect this to hinder them much. In addition to the remaining filming, they feel

they need to undertake some self-criticism, both to improve their editing of this film and for the sake of future projects.

*What do you anticipate will come out in the self-criticism?*

For one thing, although two of them worked on the project with the support of many others, they failed to put together a film crew which worked consistently on this film and would be ready to make more films in the future. Also, they meant to have a more collective process in making the film, but isolated themselves from people at the base. They did consult with the residents about the general direction of the film, but did not work closely with them; the filmmakers did not share the film and therefore the people did not participate fully enough. The fault lies partly in failure to consolidate a crew, partly in economic problems. My friend, for one, could not afford to work on the film all the time that was necessary. Being aware of this error, they will now consult with the people before beginning to edit, so the people can make suggestions for improvement.

They face a third and related error. As a small group of filmmakers, they failed to carry on political work in the *barriada*. They came and went; they discussed the film in a limited sense, but were not a permanent presence in the zone. If the filmmakers had at least been sharing the film more, if the people had participated in its elaboration, then the people would have been developing politically.

*This last reminds us of the criticism that progressives in the sierra make of anthropologists. The anthropologists come to observe and write about the peasants, even with sympathy and good intentions, but come and then go. They give nothing, and they do not participate in an effort to develop political consciousness, both their own and that of the peasants. In the worst of cases it is exploitative. In the best, as with your friend's work, people genuinely intend political engagement. The product of your friend's presence clearly will aid this and other communities.*

Yes, one of the most important things to come out of that work will be the lessons that they can share with other filmmakers.

*Aside from your work in video, what other projects do you have?*

We are planning small studio workshops for the production of slides. In our film projection work, we have recognized a great limitation. The foreign films we show often reflect realities very different from ours and thus unimportant to us, although a few, like Sanjinés' *BLOOD OF THE CONDOR*, almost exactly parallel Peruvian life. So we are trying to organize these studios with other filmmakers and technicians and with groups in the *barriadas*. Once the studios exist, social and political organizations will be able to take photographs of their own reality and then project those slides for discussions and debates. The project is economically feasible and can lead to greater popular enthusiasm and participation.

I don't know if you understand what kinds of economic limits we work under. I told you our exhibition group has three projectors, one broken by the police. Of those, I got one by trading a horse for it! Another someone "liberated" for us. The other was also a present, but it had only a motor and no lens, nor bulb. We had to rebuild it completely.

We have had to establish a network of technical and industrial assistance, such as finding ways to do lab work very cheaply. One of our members is very good at electronics and can build a slide projector which can run off batteries. All he needs is the lens to start with. We do slide shows with black and white, 35mm positive slides. When we and other militant Latin American filmmakers go to a film festival such as those in Cuba, we are not looking for worldwide distribution. We just need enough sales to recuperate our costs and to go on. The Peruvian government strongly censors all militant film. And it is not interested in protecting and encouraging filmmaking in general, much less distributing 16mm films.

*Do you and your collaborators plan to help the people of the unions, barriadas, and peasant communities use photographic equipment to make their own videotapes, or super-8 films? We realize this is difficult, given the costs and lack of resources here, but as you know, it has been done elsewhere.*

Look, for the moment, for personal reasons, I can't plan much of that. I have to finish my video projects first of all. I'm paid for much of my video work. That and the writing and photographing for magazines keep me going. But, yes, we are thinking of involving workers in making videotapes, in planning and scripting and the whole process. This is a concrete project, but separate from my present work in video. In film the fundamental thing is to push the ideas of *Cinematógrafo*, to get a debate going in the film movement.

Let me say just a few words about the group who published *Cinematógrafo*.

We meant to make films, films arising out of political and ideological discussions about film and about Peruvian reality. But we could not make them, mainly because of economic conditions. Out of a group of about fifteen people, five of us participated the most in discussions and reached a certain level of unity. We five put out the magazine and began to play a very active role in the film movement of 1974-1976, which we discussed earlier. The central preoccupation of *Cinematógrafo* is the problem of what a national cinema is. In Number 4, we intend to have a long theoretical article on this problem, resulting from an internal editorial seminar which went on for six or eight intensive meetings and which we taped. We discussed national cinema from political, cultural, economic, social, and cinematic points of view. Since 1975 there has been no insistent debate and no public discussion on national, political cinema, and this is very damaging. We wish to pick up the impulse of 1975, to stimulate a great debate and promote a new cinematic

movement in this country.

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Interview with Pedro Pimente Film reborn in Mozambique

by Clyde Taylor

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### INTRODUCTION

The first films produced by independent Mozambique toured the United States at the end of 1981, accompanied by lectures and dialogues from Pedro Pimente, assistant director of the Mozambique Film Institute (IMAGINE), and Camilo De Sousa, Mozambican filmmaker. Positive Productions, a Washington, D.C., film collective organized the tour.

Among the films premiered were these. *THESE ARE THE WEAPONS* (b/w, 50 min.) is a documentary portrayal of the past and continuing struggle against foreign domination. It focuses on the costly invasions against Mozambique by the former Ian Smith regime of southern Rhodesia. *MUEDA* (b/w, 80 min.), directed by Ruy Guerra, captures the annual reenactment of the townspeople of Mueda of their early struggles for independence from Portugal. *LET'S FIGHT FOR ZIMBABWE* (color, 30 min.), a co-production with Angola, examines the successful seizure of independence by the people of Zimbabwe. *THEY DARE CROSS OUR BORDER* (b/w, 25 min.) documents the Mozambican response to a South African-led attack on Matola, close to the capital, Maputo, in January 1981. *THE OFFENSIVE* (b/w, 30 min.) offers a candid report on a campaign against corruption, bureaucracy, and inefficiency in Mozambique. *UNITY IN FEAST* (color, 10 min.) portrays the celebration of independent Mozambican culture at the first Festival of Traditional Song held in Maputo.

The Mozambican representatives also brought with them footage of South Africa's recent invasion of Angola, shot by Camilo De Sousa. They have not completed that film-in-progress because of breakdown in the film institute's one optical printer.

Film production equipment was the primary goal of this fund-raising tour. Pedro Pimente observed that the film schools of several universities they visited had far better equipment than the entire nation of Mozambique. The tour met with success through the contribution of a

16mm optical printer (they still need a 35mm printer) and the raising of over \$8,000.

This interview was recorded during the tour in the San Francisco Bay Area, organized by the African Film Society. It is reprinted courtesy of the African Film Society *Update*. Included at the end are two questions and responses from a dialogue with the audience at the Pacific Film Archives, 15 November 1981, where *THESE ARE THE WEAPONS* was screened along with other films.

Films from the Mozambican Film Institute are distributed in the United States by Positive Productions, 48 Q Street, NE, Washington, DC 20002, (202) 529-0220.

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*Tell us something about the origin and direction of the Mozambique Film Institute.*

The Mozambique Film Institute was founded in 1976, just some months after Independence. Some years before, during the armed struggle, FRELIMO started to use cinema as one of its several weapons. But with Mozambican filmmakers then, some foreign filmmakers were invited to come to film the struggle.

For instance, *THESE ARE THE WEAPONS* uses mostly archive footage because the Film Institute has very limited resources. The armed struggle was only shot by foreign filmmakers, mostly by Robert Van Lierop, an Afro-American who made *A LUTA CONTINUA* and *O POVO ORGANIZADO*. The Mozambique Film Institute started when people like Robert Van Lierop started making films on Mozambique, films in which Mozambicans are actors and directors of their own destiny, of their own future. These films were used on an external level, for diplomatic purposes, to inform people about what was going on in Mozambique and also internally.

From this moment, it was clear to our leaders that cinema could be very important for the new nation's development. That's why some months after Independence and in a moment when Mozambique was facing very difficult problems — for example, all the Portuguese were fleeing the country and for twelve million people there were only forty doctors — the government decided to found a film institute, just after it started a literacy campaign.

Our first problem was to decolonize. Before Independence, some Portuguese had made a few films used for propaganda for colonialism; the films' postproduction was done entirely abroad, in Portugal or South Africa, although shot in Mozambique.

Mozambique faced a classical situation of dependence in terms of film distribution. For only forty-five cinema halls, Mozambique was importing more than a thousand film titles, all from very few points of origin: U.S. films, Indian films, Kung Fu films, and the worst European

films, such as Spaghetti Westerns from Italy. Of course, we have an ideological explanation for this but also an economic explanation, since the companies based in Mozambique and South Africa used film to export currency in a classic situation of economic dependence. The first task for the Institute was to transform the situation by making sure that the films distributed in Mozambique were in accord with the political, cultural, and human values of Mozambique and to do so in an economically beneficial way for Mozambique.

So we started our activity distributing revolutionary films from many countries, socialist countries. And the support that we had from the public for this new kind of film showed us that the idea that the public only likes bad films is wrong.

*Was the film industry nationalized? Both production and distribution?*

Yes, in 1978. We are a state organization, but Mozambique is a very poor state with all kinds of other priorities in medicine, food, clothing, etc.. Cinema can't have priority in terms of finance. Film production had to become self-financed. We decided to become so through distribution, in order to start national film production.

In terms of production, we started from nothing. Not one Mozambican filmmaker existed in 1975. We started training people and getting technology. Since 1978 we have had the basic technical facilities to produce, in black and white, 16m and 35m films. We started from a small organization of six people and now we are eighty. Even after twenty years of independence, several African countries don't have a film institute. Since Independence, we have made seventy documentaries and four feature films. It is our victory. We are not modest, we are not hypocrites; it's our victory.

Our main objective is to produce and distribute films, which in one sense or another can reflect our reality, our problems, our lives, our past, and our goals. Films from other countries can aid our growing and can reflect the reality of other people, which we need to know. We want to make cinema a freedom tool, to use cinema to free our minds, to allow people to use films to pose questions about themselves and the world, about all situations. We believe even entertainment films can achieve an educational purpose and allow people to transform themselves. Transforming themselves they are transforming society, and we believe that transforming society they are also transforming the cinema so a new and different cinema can be born.

*Would you say something about the film viewing experience of the Mozambican people at the time of Independence?*

Cinema had been something limited to the Portuguese here. For many reasons, the Mozambican masses couldn't see cinema before Independence. In the old days, the forty-five cinema halls in the cities served 200,000 Portuguese settlers. There were not enough, by a long shot, for twelve million Mozambicans.

For most of our people, cinema is a direct fruit of Independence. When we arrive in a very remote village and show a film, people will tell us, "This is a result of Independence because before Independence this village never saw a film." So most of our people have not been alienated by dominant imperialist cinema. We can create a new audience which will use film other than to digest it to escape from daily problems.

*I understand that Jean-Luc Godard, when he was in Mozambique, was interested in the impact of cinema on people who had not had it before.*

We had a research project to define what kinds of images we should produce in Mozambique, where most people are looking at film images for the first time in their lives. We wanted to study how people can be transformed by a new image and how people can transform images themselves. This experiment turned out to be too costly, and the funding agency pulled out at the last minute. But we had wanted to use all means of audiovisual communication — film, video, slides, posters, stills — to learn from the public what kind of new audiovisual language we should create.

We think there is a risk in a country like Mozambique that in our social transformation process the image producers will not be able to build, an image of a new society. We believe that images are not neutral. Images always carry the culture and ideology of the society which makes them. And the producers of images, all of us, have been educated by the imperialist image. Even if we resist this image, even if we denounce it, we still have been educated by it and our daily life is full of this image, in every magazine and every film. So in this sense, image production would not contribute to freeing the mind but would only perpetuate the image of imperialism.

We have been studying other socialist experiences with films. We think that at a certain level of development in socialism, there is a tendency to imitate the dominant image. But you cannot use the same image and merely change the ideology. It is necessary to change the image to really produce a new thing, the product of a new ideology.

A country like Mozambique had 95 percent illiteracy in 1975. There is still a high level of illiteracy (even though we had a national literacy campaign). And our people have been very distant from any kind of information for so many years. Now we have to produce information through images in order to allow these people to make the transformations quickly. Technological societies move very fast. To get out from underdevelopment, we need to complete historical stages very quickly. During five centuries we were pushed out of history, and now we have to recover from that in a short time. If we don't transform ourselves quickly, we will remain in underdevelopment.

On the one hand, we need to be very careful because of our education and our past. On the other hand, we need to move quickly. I think this contradiction is solved by transforming all our image producers. Even



the projectionist must change his relation to cinema, and so must the audience change its relations with images. Only this ideological transformation will allow us to avoid the risk of making the same error that other people have been making.

Our challenge as producers of images in an underdeveloped country is very hard. We produce information every day, and we know this information acts on people's minds. We must teach the teacher, but in Mozambique the teacher is the people. You can't say, "I'm a filmmaker. I'm dealing with high technology. That's my problem, and I don't want to be in contact with the masses." Since we believe that the teacher is the masses, the people, teaching the teacher means transforming ourselves. Only then can we produce the images that our society needs at every moment. If not, we will make images, good ones, maybe, but ones that do not reflect the exact stage of our evolution.

We have a lot of theory in our age. We have been reading film books from other cultures at other stages of development. There is a natural tendency to want to imitate these things and to think that this is "the real cinema." But our new cinema will be born from the destruction of the old cinema, the dominant one now. So we have to be very vigilant, very careful, and it's difficult.

On this tour in the United States we've had to see our films many times, which allows us to think about them. We see a lot of clichés there that do not come out of Mozambique but from our education, things learned from Santiago Alvarez in Cuba or from others, from I don't know where. Some people say this is a chauvinist perspective, but we do accept the need to study others' film experiences. But the determining thing in transforming Mozambique will be our own experience and not experiences which come out of other realities.

*Has there been any effort to train people in film viewing?*

Most people in the Film Institute started viewing films after Independence inside the Institute. Of course, some of us, because of our education, have a past history of film viewing. For example, for several years I participated in cine clubs, just like those here. But since most people in the Institute started viewing films on entering the Institute, it's necessary to educate them in a very urgent way since they will produce film.

We are also educating big audiences to view films, in the same sense that we are teaching people how to read and write in Mozambique. We do this through mobile cinema to reach people living in rural zones. And we make a screening not only a cinematic event but also a wider political and cultural event.

We never just show a film that would create paternalism. Because then people would feel, "Okay, they are offering me a film, and okay, I accept it. I'll be underdeveloped all the time, accepting what they offer." When we show a film, we ask people to show us something of their own

culture. We put in a lot of political effort to get them to discuss a problem, to introduce new information. We must make it a very dynamic thing. We can't arrive, show a film, and say, "Bye-bye — see you next time." That would make the spectator submit to the spectacle. We bring films, but we want people to produce their culture and not be submitted by films, by only one way of culture.

The Institute's educational work derives not only from the films but also from using cinema. Cinema is only a means, not an end in itself. So we can't use cinema only to show it. We must use it to provoke something else, another kind of discussion communication. It can come through speaking, through dance, through singing, or through discussing problems.

*How have U.S. audiences responded to your films?*

Viewers here know a little something about Mozambique and want to know more. So in principle they react positively to our films. But it's a long process to educate people here to the shocking and hard reality of Mozambique. Ours is the reality of war, the reality of people facing very hard problems -economic, cultural, and social problems. But it's also a reality of a people with a big confidence in itself, people with a hope for something better. But people in the United States also have a great hope for something better. Of course, we must have continuous communication for people abroad to understand our exact problems and to be more critical about our films. Because although it's good to hear applause, we need critiques.

*An Afro-American student at (UC Berkeley said she understood why you made the films for Mozambique but wanted to know why you showed them here, outside Mozambique.*

We believe that we are not isolated in our struggle, in our problems, in our daily life. Our struggle has a lot to do with and to say to other countries. It is important for us to feel we are not isolated. With all our problems, we need international solidarity to achieve our process and go forward. And we need to inform people in foreign countries about our reality because their mass media are organized to manipulate reality. Those media present all peoples struggling for self-determination as being manipulated by superpowers, who intend to do this and that and to kill people and all that. This is not true! We only want to achieve a basic freedom. But when a people fights for freedom, the international mass media always say that that people are fighting for another superpower. They always put you in terms of colonialism. They can't believe that people want to free themselves only for themselves and not for another superpower. People in other countries must know this to allow them to better understand their own reality and to make the links between their reality and other realities.

In this sense, I think we can contribute to a new international order of communication between people, which is an order without the monopoly of communication and information by some countries.

*Thinking of an U.S. audience, when they see films like THESE ARE THE WEAPONS and MUEDA, what ought they be aware of that is different from what they might expect?*

We want to tell people that they must accept that we have our own culture, our own history, our own past and tradition, and that we will tend to make our own things in Mozambique. It's a basic thing for any people to achieve a process of liberation, but liberation is a concept that must be opened up. Sometimes liberation is a very limited concept. It's not made casually. This is said to put in the minds of people that when people are trying to liberate themselves, it's dangerous — and it is — but for the exploiters, it is really dangerous!

People must understand that culture and politics are the same thing; they are the result of the same thing. There is no basic contradiction between politics and culture, although there can be between culture and certain forms of politics. We must try to coordinate the two, to join the political front to the cultural front, to something in evolution, in progress.

We don't want to be opposition filmmakers because we have no contradictions with the Mozambique's political front. The political front derives from the cultural front as well as the cultural front derives from certain political achievements in Mozambique. This is true in any society, and our films can contribute to peoples' understanding of this.

Of course, each people has specific realities; we can analyze these realities and point out that direction. But some methods of analysis can be better used in different situations. What we propose through our films is that our method of analysis can produce a new behavior among filmmakers. It will concern not only film style and content but also situations of production and distribution. But also something which is larger, which is the world. We cannot separate films and what's going on in the world but must always try to find the links that exist. Film is a good vehicle to find the links between politics and culture.

*(Question from the audience at Pacific Film Archives) South Africa and Rhodesia chose to invade and get involved with your liberation. Why can't you cross the border and get involved with liberating Namibia?*

Mozambique's foreign minister could answer this question better. We will give any kind of support to the Namibians if the Namibians ask it of us. There were Mozambican soldiers in Rhodesia. It is public knowledge we never hid from anyone. It's a tradition.

But support has different forms. THESE ARE THE WEAPONS shows that the weapons are not just military ones. There are several weapons and support has several forms. Thus, supporting us to make films in Mozambique supports liberation in Namibia. Last September, Camilo De Souza was in southern Angola making a film about the recent invasion of Angola by South Africa. That film is ready in Mozambique,

but we don't have an optical printer to make prints and show it all over the world. And this would have supported SWAPO and Namibia, to have shown this film here today.

*(Question from the audience) Has there been any dialogue between Mozambican filmmakers and independent progressive filmmakers in this country who seek to show the contradictions in U.S. society from a black point of view and to show the relations of U.S. foreign policy to the oppression of other Third World countries?*

One of our objectives is to make such contacts because we don't know anything about Afro-American cinema. It's obvious that international relations are organized to impede independent Afro-American filmmakers from contacting us and us from contacting them. But here these contacts have been made through concrete acts: for example, Larry Clark, an independent African filmmaker, decided to give his film *PASSING THROUGH* to Mozambique. This is a very concrete thing and demonstrates a sense of solidarity between him and us. From a gesture like this, we have a platform for talking. From this gesture, we can do anything.

We are poor, but ideologically we are richer than the rich people. We are trying, by speaking in the U.S., to make it clear that our struggle as filmmakers in Mozambique is not isolated from the struggle of U.S. independent filmmakers. It's possible to find a way; it's only a matter of our own capacity. And we believe we have found the way.

A lot of things can be done to change the lack of communication between Mozambique and U.S. filmmakers. Concretely, we are trying to organize a week of Afro-American cinema in Mozambique. From this we can discover something else to do, and from that, something else. I believe that everything is to be done; nothing has been done yet.

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Alternative cinema in the 80s

by Chuck Kleinhans

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In 1953, six years into the anticommunist witch hunt in Hollywood and the culture industry, John Howard Lawson, former president of the Screen Writers Guild and member of the Hollywood Ten, summed up the Communist Party's experience of actively working in a limited but significant way in a major capitalist entertainment industry. After describing the overt government campaign against the left in Hollywood, which dramatized the struggle for ideological control of culture, Lawson called for the creation of a truly independent alternative, not

“the independence of film producers who are somewhat grudgingly allowed to exist on the fringes of the Hollywood industry, using money borrowed from the big banks and dependent on the system of distribution and exhibition controlled by the Big Money. Production which is independent in a creative sense must be free from monopoly control, free from the class domination of the bourgeoisie, and — this is a condition which is in some respects the most difficult to guarantee — free from the ideology of the dominant class.” (*Film in the Battle of Ideas*, p. 117)

Lawson's conclusion, that the main task for radicals is to build a media culture outside of the commercial system, remains valid today. While developing a left and feminist analysis of Hollywood and TV continues to be an important concern, it is also clear that radicals cannot gain significant influence on, much less control of, any mass-market filmmaking short of a socialist revolution. To the extent that Hollywood moves in a progressive direction from time to time, it is in response to active mass movements. Jane Fonda, Ed Asner, Robert Redford, and Jill Clayburgh have space as creative and public figures because millions of people are ready for a drastic change in U.S. social and political life and not the other way around.

From the start, JUMP CUT has been committed to supporting alternative film and video making. Because of that and our ongoing

discussion of independent work in every issue, it's somewhat artificial to have a "Special Section" to call attention to the topic. But stopping here between past and future articles and interviews provides an opportunity to discuss several concerns that shape JUMP CUT's work in independent media.

While there's always been agreement within JUMP CUT about the importance of alternative film, we've never put forward a specific "line" about what kinds of independent work and what modes, forms, styles, topics, and issues are most important. While different writers and staff people have certainly had strong opinions about those issues, it has always seemed most important to provide an environment for active dialogue. In an editorial in JUMP CUT No. 3 (1974), John Hess and I indicated some of the issues we thought were pertinent then:

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"This issue contains an interview with and an article by people working in independent political filmmaking, a subject that JUMP CUT will continue to explore in future issues. The views presented certainly don't exhaust the range of the subject, but they offer some obvious contrasts.

Following the French general strike in May-June, 1968, Jean-Pierre Gorin became Jean-Luc Godard's partner. The two have pursued a revolutionary form to match an explicitly revolutionary content, and they have produced the most controversial political films of the past six years. Cine Manifest is a new group working in San Francisco, coming to terms with their diverse experience in film and radical politics and trying to create progressive new films for the mass audience.

Despite their differences, these filmmakers are engaged with the same problems of subject matter and treatment, relationship to the film audience, and defining who that audience is, or should be — all of them, finally, political questions.

In this context it's useful to raise another question, or rather to recall one raised several years ago by Norm Fruchter about left media work. In an article in LIBERATION (May, 71), Fruchter, who had worked in a Newsreel collective, made a number of criticisms of the way the movement of the 60s dealt with the media. One criticism that radicals had drifted from direct organizing into one form or another of propaganda work: the underground press, research groups, printing efforts, and the Newsreel collectives. Although these groupings shared the larger political and organizational problems of the left at the time, they also took on their own characteristic form. Often the work at hand required only a small working collective, was task oriented, involved strong primary relationships with each other, accentuated political discussion, and had an absorbing, rotating division of labor. The positive achievement of this form was to define a style of collective and participative work — and frequently a context in which questions such as personal elitism and sexism could be raised, and sometimes fruitfully dealt with. However, the collective tended to function as well as an

isolated group, defining itself and its media work in a "we/them" dichotomy, with no direct contact with "them" — the people they were trying to communicate with. As Fruchter stated it,

"Almost all propaganda work is a way of doing political work without directly facing or confronting a constituency ..."

The criticism remains with us today, whether the filmmaker is an individual or a collective. In many ways the problem is aggravated by the decline of the mass movement of the 60s, when at least one could feel that a political film was going out to the "movement" where it would be used and where it would aid people in motion. Today that national organized movement is much harder to identify. Where it appears it is largely engaged in one kind of educational work or another — essentially the making and distributing of propaganda — or in service work, except for scattered local struggles for power. Which is to say, we're in a different historical moment, and the same basic questions have to be answered in fresh terms.

Film in and of itself is not a viable way of breaking out of this relative isolation. Film appears as a finished product, a totality, with the result that documentaries or films of political analysis appear more coherent and unified than the original situation was, and the makers appear, in turn, more certain — and unfortunately sometimes more rhetorical and dogmatic — than they really are. Movies are essentially private and reflective, passive individual experiences. And to equate the viewing experience, however intellectually engaging, with political action, is false ... At best, political films can only have a limited effect when operating without a direct relation to ongoing political activity. To paraphrase the Peruvian poet Cesar Vallejo, people become revolutionaries not from ideas they learn, but from lived experience.

But, dealing with these problems cannot be based on singing the "Where Has the Movement Gone" blues. We have the opportunity now to learn from the lessons of the past, explore the realities of the present, and establish a relation to audience and constituency that goes beyond the already radicalized — who were, all too often, the exclusive audience for radical media in the past. For a radical today, using one's skills making films might be, but does not have to be, "a way of doing political work without directly facing or confronting a constituency." Fruchter's criticism is still pertinent, but it must be responded to with the creative tension of working with a constant awareness of and commitment to a constituency. Two questions about one's work go a long way to keeping it from being an escape: "For whom?" and "For what end?"

Cine Manifest argues for films that combine a left perspective with a popular narrative form already familiar to the mass audience, while Gorin and Godard believe that traditional forms themselves negate radical content. This question has been the most hotly discussed one among political filmmakers and critics here and abroad in recent years. One solution to the question has been offered by some feminist

filmmakers in the United States. They have shown it is possible to reach new audiences — in women's groups, libraries, and public schools — with films that combine personal statement and political analysis with experimental and innovative means. We do not have a formula for the best kind of political filmmaking, but we can see that answering the questions "For whom?" and "For what end?" is a necessary step. The fact is that there are political struggles which filmmakers can relate to and audiences who need their films."

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JUMP CUT has changed over the years. We began with five editors fresh out of years of graduate school in Bloomington, Indiana — not exactly a place where you could see a lot of independent film. Only one of us had filmmaking experience at that time. Today almost everyone on the editorial board and staff has had some experience in making films and tapes. For several years, about half the folks involved are actively making independent work. We've also changed through meeting many film and video makers, seeing lots of new films and tapes, and being involved in discussions of the key issues. While we haven't given up analyzing the dominant cinema (after all, you can't escape it), we've grown in our commitment to and understanding of a radical alternative.

At present two different but related activities are needed to develop and strengthen an oppositional film and video movement in North America. First, those concerned must expand their horizons and see that it is important to bring together, in whatever ways possible, the largest number of people who are committed to opposing Reaganism in all its forms. In political terms, this is the task of building an effective resistance coalition. A fragile version of this emerged at the Alternative Cinema Conference in 1979 when 400 radical media people gathered to discuss common concerns (see reports in JUMP CUT Nos. 21 and 22).

The Alternative Cinema Conference marked the clear emergence of new forces and new faces. Feminists, black and Third World people, gays and lesbians came forward as the cutting edge of fresh thought and committed media work at the meeting. We saw a broader spectrum of alternative efforts, including anti-nuke and environmental work, community-based video, and new projects in distribution and exhibition. Generally speaking, almost all the conference participants gained a new sense of the complex interrelations between financing, production, distribution, exhibition, criticism, and also the relation to ongoing organizations and movements for social and political change. In the wake of the conference, however, people were unable to create a sustaining organization.

Today, JUMP CUT remains committed to providing a forum for the central issues of alternative cinema, a place for the voices of filmmakers as well as critics, an arena for discussion by a wide range of people with different political analyses and programs. Of course, JUMP CUT is only one part of a larger movement concerned with building a radical media culture.



A broad-based alternative media movement must have effective mechanisms for presentation and discussion of political principles and differences. A lowest common denominator situation will stagnate without the discussion that allows for growth and change in the face of new experience. Yet such an effort can be fragmented and reduced to silliness and acrimony if it is only a forum for sectarian squabbling. The challenge of promoting a healthy exchange of ideas on a wide range of aesthetic, political, and practical ideas must be met to provide growth and development for individuals, groups, and on a national level. At present such discussion takes place erratically at best. There are few national or regional conferences which genuinely bring together activists and artists, makers and distributors, academics and organizers, anti-nuke folks and labor militants, blacks and Latinos. Yet, obviously all these people and many others have much to gain from getting together and building alliances, sharing information, increasing mutual support, and pushing for common goals. Among publications, only *Cineaste* and JUMP CUT have worked consistently and extensively to cover and discuss the situation of alternative media from a left perspective. And both have self-admitted limitations in doing the job and are open to a variety of legitimate criticisms. Clearly, much more needs to be done.

The development of objective conditions which create the space and energy for a resurgent progressive movement is taking place at a key moment in the history of U.S. media. While multinationals and conglomerates are increasingly taking control of the entertainment and communication industries, a vast technological change is taking place with the appearance of cable and subscriber TV, satellite communication, video recorders, interactive computers, and a whole range of new items and processes which prefigure a very different media future, even if no one seems to know what that future is.

In the sixties, in response to a mass movement and an urgent need for communications independent from the capitalist press and media, the underground press blossomed into hundreds of local papers which capitalized on the existence of bargain basement printing technology. For all its problems, erratic nature, and often short-lived existence, the underground press provided an immensely creative grassroots response to an urgent need. Combining art and politics, visuals and prose, information, entertainment, satire, cultural discussion and political analysis, it was a vital element in local and national activity. Today we have the technical potential to make and distribute video materials in an equally creative way. Will it happen? It's probably too early to predict, but it certainly is an opportunity that shouldn't be missed if it can be brought off.

Building an oppositional media in the eighties is an immense task. Yet it is absolutely crucial to the development of the entire spectrum of progressive forces: workers and the poor, gays and lesbians, blacks, Latinos and other oppressed minorities, feminists, students, and youth

who face unemployment and militarism, and many others. We live in a literate mass media and mass culture society that increasingly concentrates power and control in the hands of the ruling capitalist class. Communication, education, information, entertainment, and other functions of the opposition movement must use contemporary means and find new forms for today's contents. It's a challenging prospect, but it's also an exciting one, which calls for creativity, imagination, hard work, commitment, individual growth, and group interaction. We need only compare the possibilities of radical media work today with the deadly fit-in-the-slot orientation of the dominant media to decide which side offers cultural workers a better future.

It's in the context of a growing political movement and new challenges for radicals that we present the articles in this Special Section. Lynn Garafola surveys the emerging progressive feature movement with an eye to its potential problems and successes. In an interview with D.E.C. Films, the leading Canadian distributor of movement media, Margaret Cooper investigates the practical politics of distribution. Two recently widely seen films provide the opportunity for in-depth reviews as Doug Eisenstark discusses the anti-nuke feature documentary, *WE ARE THE GUINEA PIGS*, and Sue Davenport looks at the radical history film about women workers in World War 2, *ROSIE THE RIVETER*. Expanding the usual range of radical concerns, Claudia Gorbman critiques an autobiographical experimental film, *SUSANA*, while Gina Marchetti and Carol Slingo consider avant-garde filmmaker Sharon Couzin's work. Concluding the survey of alternative cinema, Clyde Taylor provides an overview of recent black independent film.

Taken together, these articles mark many of JUMP CUT's major concerns in alternative media. Future issues will continue our commitment to reporting, analyzing, and building an independent media culture as part of the movement for radical social and political transformation.

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### Independent features at the crossroads

by Lynn Garafola

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The history of U.S. independent feature film is a saga of wasted talent and little recognition. Since the thirties, when independent filmmakers first tried bucking Hollywood and working outside the studio system, they have fought an uphill battle against vastly superior financial resources, distribution and exhibition monopolies, and the expectations of an audience bred on the film capital's assembly-line product. (By "independent," I mean a broad range of feature length, documentary or fictional films financed outside traditional Hollywood and corporate channels, but at the same time seeking serious public exposure. Although this definition does not necessarily exclude "experimental," "educational," and "militant" films, these types of films tend to be addressed to more specialized audiences.)

Although today's independents still contend against overwhelming odds, the outlook has brightened. Barbara Koppel's *HARLAN COUNTY, U.S.A.*, Miguel Pinero's *SHORT EYES*, and Claudia Weill's *GIRLFRIENDS* have drawn critical and popular attention to movies made outside the Hollywood establishment. At the same time, the release of government monies through the National Endowments for the Humanities and the Arts and individual state councils has sparked a new bid among independents for public visibility and increased financial support.

The six-day Festival of American Independent Films, held in autumn 1979, heralded this new status. With entries selected by the establishment-minded Lincoln Center Film Society and the Film Fund, independents were, for the first time, guaranteed more than token representation at the annual New York Film Festival. Under the direction of Sandra Schulberg, a program of fifteen pictures, including six of recent vintage, gave New Yorkers an intimation of the vitality and diversity of independent feature filmmaking.

In an interview in *In These Times*, Schulberg noted some of the

differences between independent features of the past and today's "new American cinema." In the sixties, independent films, supported by a large college audience, "were political by virtue of form." Today's filmmakers want to make "socially and humanly responsible films," but they also want to reach a larger audience. In particular, they want to tap potential filmgoers outside the 18-25-year-old "commercial" market. Hence, she notes along with a more populist approach to the U.S. "heartlands," there is a new theatrical emphasis among the recent crop of independent filmmakers. To compete with Hollywood, today's independents are favoring conventional narratives over documentaries (assumed to have less audience appeal), "sophistication" at the expense of experiment, radical content instead of radical form.

Selection screenings for the festival confirmed a strong regional vein in recent independent work. Unlike the past, when aspiring directors flocked to Hollywood and New York, the country's twin motion picture capitals, today's independent films increasingly emerge from a local] setting, the work of filmmakers with roots in local communities. Socially and geographically, the films showcased at the 1979 festival evoked a very different United States from Hollywood's. Robert Young's *ALAMBRISTA!*, filmed in Mexico and the Southwest, explored the plight of undocumented workers. *BUSH MAMA* by Ethiopian filmmaker Haile Gerima depicted the changing consciousness of a welfare mother in Watts. In *GAL YOUNG 'UN*, Victor Nuñez showed a backwoods Florida woman who marries a bootlegger, while from the Great Plains came *NORTHERN LIGHTS*, a film by John Hanson and Bob Nilsson about farmers in the North Dakota Non-Partisan League, and Richard Pearce's *HEARTLAND*, the story of a woman homesteader in Wyoming.

With the exception of *ALAMBRISTA!* and *BUSH MAMA*, these films are rooted not only in the diversity of United States but in its past. Like the ethnic revival and "roots-mania" of some years back, a strong vein of antiquarianism runs through them, a mystique of the past that in varying degrees equates family relics with social history. As the picture's community resource consultant, Sam Gowan, remarked,

"*GAL YOUNG 'UN* enlivens our sense of self. It brought noise back to a long empty and great house. Old people said, 'I remember ...' and younger people searched attics. The film involves the community, it continues the record, and it has given us greater continuity."

The North Dakota community where *NORTHERN LIGHTS* was filmed was equally a source of inspiration. Both Hanson and Nilsson grew up in the area; they know its Scandinavian traditions and its people intimately. Moreover, as radicals, they bring to their subject an understanding of the political and economic forces that threatened to destroy farming communities throughout the Midwest on the eve of the WW1.

*NORTHERN LIGHTS* evolved from a half-hour documentary to a ninety-minute "docudrama," described by Michael Dempsey in *Film*

*Quarterly* as "a saga of grass roots politics, a love story, and a period setting." In the passage from fact to fiction, however, the movie wavers between historical recreation and dramatic invention which are never completely fused. The beautifully wrought interiors, like the threshing and other farm scenes, are genuine evocations of another era while Judy Irola's masterful black and white cinematography, in the words of one critic, "works... to give the film the nostalgic remoteness of a turn-of-the-century family photograph." Indeed, at times, the camera work and period setting take on a life independent of the film's dramatic development.

There is nothing wrong with recreating the past. But in *HEARTLAND*, *GAL YOUNG 'UN*, and *NORTHERN LIGHTS*, the approach to history is a romantic one. Families are idealized as a condition of group survival, and the obsession with "authenticity," defined as specific artifacts — oil lamps, farm machinery, and the like — ends up fetishizing the past as something merely "quaint." Nor are there many references to a larger historical context. In *NORTHERN LIGHTS*, for example, the Non-Partisan League exists in a vacuum, isolated from the political currents of its day. The Socialist Party, although active in the area, receives only passing mention, while the war raging in Europe is ignored altogether. Equally "unhistorical" in many of these productions is the depiction of personal relationships, which too often smack of television soap opera.

Even a film as ostensibly "radical" as *THE WOBBLIES*, the token documentary screened at the 1979 New York Film Festival, is curiously depoliticized. Structured around the recollections of surviving Wobblies, the film allows oral history to dictate the parameters of its story, never questioning the raw data of reminiscence or recasting what is being said into a broader historical context. Why did the Lawrence strike succeed and the Paterson strike fail? What was the relationship between the I.W.W. and the Socialist Party? Who were the "hobos" who rode the boxcars and worked in the lumber camps? Questions like these, suggested by the script itself, go not only unanswered but unasked.

There is a curious dichotomy in the film between the radicalism of the Wobblies — which survives in the individuals interviewed — and the apparent desire of the filmmakers to make the I.W.W. respectable and sympathetic to a contemporary audience. The cutting of reminiscences on humorous upbeat and the juxtaposition of rag tunes with pre-war film footage cast militant events within a framework of anecdote and musical innocence. The protagonists, shot in the homey comfort of retirement, spin their yarns like "old folks" rather than revolutionaries. The Wobblies' dream of an anarcho-syndicalist world controlled by workers is equally sanitized. If the immediate causes of pre-War radicalism were the social and economic injustices of the day, alleviating bad working conditions, overcrowded tenements, and suppression of free speech was not the Wobblies' only goal. In shifting the emphasis from revolution to reform, the filmmakers not only fail to explain the intense repression to which the Wobblies were subjected, but the film effectively transforms radical aspirations into a "liberal" and hence

politically neutral context.

The trend toward "social antiquarianism" is fostered, in part, by government funding policies, and especially by the "populism" of the National Endowment for the Humanities, which funded THE WOBBLES, NORTHERN LIGHTS and HEARTLAND. Whether awarded directly or channeled through state councils, NEH grants have become, since the mid-seventies, the single largest source of government funding and the first major alternative to the patchwork of private investment, loans, deferments, and cheap labor typical of independent film financing in the past.

NEH's sister organization, the National Endowment for the Arts (which through its Florida council funded GAL YOUNG 'UN), has, for its part, committed over a million dollars since 1978 to film production. Claudia Weill's GIRLFRIENDS and Barbara Koppel's Crystal Lee Jordan project are among the features which have received NEA support. Although the maximum size of grants awarded nationally is \$50,000 for institutions and \$15,000 for individuals, NEA's policy of spreading the wealth among as many projects as possible has meant that its grants are generally too small to affect the budget of most independent features. (A budget-conscious filmmaker like Walter Ungerer, however has proved that it is possible to make a feature-length color film on a 25,000 NEA grant.)

Filmmakers are, understandably, excited by the possibilities of NEH funding and are pressing for additional allocations. Making even low-budget movies is an expensive business, and the \$2,000 per minute rule of thumb quoted by an NEH officer to a prospective applicant is considerably more than most independents normally have at their disposal. NEH, however, does not fund films as such, but only where they are felt to be the most effective treatment of a subject that will "convey an understanding of the humanities to a broad general public." Moreover, it is not the only model of government aid nor, indeed, the most desirable. By contrast to Western European subsidy programs — advances on receipts in France, production grants in England, direct aid and screenplay awards in Germany, film bank loans and distribution in Italy — guidelines for content and bureaucratic input at critical stages of the filmmaking process are built into NEH procedures.

In 1978, NEH committed over eight million dollars to 66 media projects. Just under half went to film production, pilot, and script development grants. An additional 3.3 million was pledged to 18 TV projects, 15 at the script development stage, a number of which will probably be produced in a film rather than video format.

Despite an impressive track record, a look at the projects funded in 1978 indicates the impact of NEH guidelines and the "self-censorship" many in the business feel they induce in both the pre-selecting of material and its final presentation. Of the 41 projects in the production, pilot, and script development categories, at least three-quarters were "historical." Subjects ranged from a five-hour film series on Edith Wharton (which

received a \$400,000 outright production grant plus matching funds) to "One Hundred Years of Struggle," a television series on the history of the women's suffrage movement (awarded an \$800,000 pilot grant), and "Tales of Medical Life in America," a WGBH (PBS Boston) series on the social history of medicine from 1721 to 1921 (given a \$91,937 script development grant).

The impulse behind many of these shows is the notion of history "from the bottom up." But where in the sixties and early seventies, this radical reinterpretation of the past was tied to a contemporary political framework and, in particular, to the struggles of groups disenfranchised from history,

Time and again, in many NEH projects, the radical edge has been blunted by deflecting political analysis into historical exposition. Thus a film about Baltimore's black community looks back over 200 years at the organizations created by slaves, free blacks, and freedmen, while "Mexican-American," an eight-part television series, dramatizes episodes in the history of Mexican Americans. In both, almost no provision is made for analysis of events since the fifties. In stressing ethnic or sexual "pride" and "roots," history is viewed as a neutral territory, distinct from politics and ideology, or even a refuge from them.

Although film is a collaborative medium *par excellence*, it is also a genuinely creative one. Under the present system, however, creative projects are defined by functions, their organic unity subdivided into a series of operations, the idea of a film turned into a synthesized product. At each stage — planning, script development, pilot, and production — there are proposals to write, budgets to revise, humanists (the NEH's slightly exalted term for academic experts) to consult, reports to file, while approval at one stage does not guarantee a favorable decision at the next. Many who have worked on NEH projects suspect that the maze of bureaucratic requirements and administrative stages exist less for the benefit of individual projects than to enable NEH to justify potentially controversial grants to Congress. (Unlike the BBC with its independent income, NEH relies on annual appropriations.) Of course, the rules may also reflect a fear of taking chances and the simple unwillingness to relinquish control of projects at any point in their production.

Some projects, like THE WOBBLIES and HEARTLAND, the first completely funded NEH feature, are lucky to make it to the finish. "One Hundred Years of Struggle" is typical of less fortunate projects. After funding a pilot on the pioneering U.S. feminists Angelina and Sarah Grimke, NEH said it would be prepared to finance additional episodes only if money from outside sources was forthcoming. But raising money from "outside sources" is easier mandated than done. Since 1978, production has been suspended, and "One Hundred Years of Struggle" remains a victim of the piecemeal system of NEH support. Indeed, an advisor to a number of NEH projects, who asked that his name be withheld, has asserted that endowment funding of a multi-part series

almost guarantees the project will fail. (See the case study of HEARTLAND below.)

A further drawback to NEH support is that its subsidies extend only through production. They do not cover the post-production costs — release prints, distribution, publicity, and numerous other expenses — needed to bring the finished product to its audience. NEH does not oppose theatrical distribution, but its funding rationale in the past has favored programs for broadcast as the most cost-efficient way of reaching a large audience. While it is certainly true that a one-shot airing over public or educational television reaches a statistically larger public than theatrical release, the latter has what Schulberg calls "an undeniable legitimizing effect." A film that opens in a *bona fide* theater commands serious attention from the public and press.

On the question of financing, Schulberg favors a combination of private and public funding. A position paper she drew up for the Independent Feature Project

"supports the establishment of an Independent Feature Corporation to help finance a significant number of independent features ... partly through direct subsidy, and partly by helping to secure additional financing."

The IFC could be funded, she suggests, in a number of ways — through a special box office tax on-commercial films, grants from NEA, direct Congressional appropriations, contributions from the Hollywood studios. Apart from the difficulty of imagining Universal or the Transamerica Corporation forking over half a million dollars, ostensibly to "develop new talent," this proposal, like the Feature Project's endorsement of tax shelter legislation to encourage private investment in "quality motion pictures," is politically questionable. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that tax shelters would necessarily stimulate investment in independent as opposed to more commercially viable films. In Germany, for example, such legislation had the opposite effect. Instead of putting their marks on the New German Cinema, investors preferred to bankroll Hollywood productions which control the lion's share of the local market.

Another area of production financing is public television. Unlike PBS, which, with one notable exception, has a poor track record on independents, state-subsidized television in most European countries provides direct funding of all or a substantial part of the budget of many feature films. In Germany and Italy, the system has worked well. National television stations financed Fellini's ORCHESTRA REHEARSAL and much of Fassbinder's work. (Mark Rappaport, a New York based independent, has had two films commissioned by West German television as well. THE SCENIC ROUTE, his 1978 German-financed production which won the British Film Institute's Award for the Best and Most Original Film of the Year, stood out among the festival offerings as a distinctly personal vision.) European television looks to government-subsidized film industries as a source of cheap



programming, which in some cases can even return a profit. Charles Eidsvik notes in an article, "The State as Movie Mogul,"

"In France in 1977, while over 611 films attracted only 170 million theatrical viewers, ORTF (the state-owned TV network) broadcast over 500 films, reaching over four billion viewers. ORTF paid an average of \$30,000 per film; each film reached an average of nearly eight million viewers — at around three-eighths of a cent, American, per head."

In Italy RAI backed PADRE PADRONE and THE TREE OF THE WOODEN CLOGS, both of which brought the television network considerable profits from theatrical release at home and abroad.

By and large, public TV in this country has used British productions as a cheap source of tele-films and tele-dramas, availing itself of BBC expertise as well as its salary scale, low even by English standards. PBS has itself initiated a number of dramatizations — the ADAMS CHRONICLES and THE SCARLET LETTER — inspired by British productions. With much of the funding coming from NEH, they were undermined by an obsession with "authenticity" at the expense of drama and the kind of red tape that belongs in corporate bureaucracies, not television studios.

The *Visions* series, funded through the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, NEA, and the Ford Foundation, was instrumental in fomenting today's independent movement. Funded by a seven million dollar consortium of grants over a three-year period, the series developed over 100 scripts and produced over 30 dramas, including more than 10 independent feature films. Although financed largely through public monies, production was relatively streamlined. In 1975, Robert Young, a film journalist who co-wrote NOTHING BUT A MAN, received a Guggenheim Fellowship to write a screenplay for ALAMBRISTA!. Living among Mexican and U.S. farmworkers in the Southwest, by the following year he was filming on location. Equally important, his work was assured of broadcast and publicity as well as critical attention. Funding for the *Visions* series, however, was not renewed, and there is currently no replacement although a proposal is being circulated within PBS to encourage feature film production through "a partnership between federal support, private investment, and other-than-public television-distribution." Despite Bob Kanter's assertion that "PBS would like to become a catalyst and facilitator for the production and distribution of independently-produced feature films," plans remain, apparently, at the talking stage although local public television continues to be a major outlet for regional productions. WNET's 1980 series *Independent Focus* seems to have marked an important breakthrough for independents. Nevertheless, the controversy over WNET's alleged censoring of political films — although some were eventually shown — may well be a harbinger of further difficulties.

A major problem independents face is distribution. One of the premises

of the independents, says Schulberg, is that "the heartland is just as hungry as people living in New York, Los Angeles, and Boston for the more substantial fare" that independents are trying to offer, and that "this silent majority has been ignored by the media powers, corporations — and studios." The latter command the vast financial resources that can turn a picture into an event. They can blanket the country's shopping malls with the latest blockbuster and expend thousands, even millions, of dollars on advertising.

Independents cannot compete with such outlays. Yet the distribution of films like *WORD IS OUT*, *THE TRIALS OF ALGER HISS*, *NORTHERN LIGHTS* and *THE WAR AT HOME* indicates that a theatrical audience does exist for so-called "noncommercial" work. Filmmakers must learn the ropes of self-distribution — how to target "primary audiences" and grassroots organizations likely to support a film, how to develop promotional strategies that will generate free and effective publicity.

Independent feature filmmaking is at a crossroads. The talent is there. So are the ideas. There is also an audience. Today's independents, says Schulberg, are "making films that come from the body politic," "handcrafted" rather than "corporatized" visions of an United States "ignored by those in power." The independents' demand for increased funding, together with their insistence on greater access to the film-going audience, is essential to build a significant alternative to Hollywood. But money alone cannot guarantee this. The way the purse strings are controlled goes a long way toward determining the final product, and the best-intentioned filmmaker may find him/herself inadvertently "playing it safe" under the benevolent aegis of endowment-style organizations. What is needed is a thorough revamping of current media programs, and the creation of subsidy programs that will foster a cinema where "independent" means, not simply "low budget" or "non-commercial," but "alternative."

### ***HEARTLAND: NEH Funding***

*HEARTLAND*, the pilot of a dramatic series about 19th century pioneer women, was funded *in toto* by NEH. As such, it is a milestone in the escalating movement among independents for government subsidies. A report by Annick Smith, the film's executive producer, for the Independent Feature Project suggests some of the drawbacks of NEH funding. She also reveals why it takes so long — in this case, three years — to produce a single 95minute film.

"In the summer of 1976, while producing a series of documentaries on Northwest Indians, I became friends with Beth Ferris, a wildlife filmmaker who also lived in Missoula. We decided ... to work together on a series about women and wilderness. In the course of seeking funds I approached NEH's Public Media Program. At that time they were interested in developing historical, biographical programming for PBS. They encouraged us to submit a proposal for a series about historical women on the frontier."

"We immediately began three months of preliminary research and slowly put together a well-documented proposal for a research, writing, and development grant. We contacted well-known historians, writers, archivists, and media professionals to serve as consultants. Since we were relatively unknown filmmakers with no institutional ties, we decided to apply to NEH through the University of Montana's Wilderness Institute — a nonprofit organization with grant administering experience. We submitted the proposal in November 1976 and received approval from NEH in March 1977."

"In retrospect, we would have been wiser to form our own company then, rather than later, and apply for the grant as independent producers ... The problem we had with the University was one of ownership and copyright as well as red tape. NEH automatically gives copyright of grant-produced material to the official recipients of a grant, no matter who runs it or whose idea it is. In any case, after considerable legal negotiations, we began the official research stage in June 1977, with an \$82,500 grant."

The filmmakers devoted the next year to researching primary source material and selecting the seven women to be featured in the series. A preproduction plan, including budget, for a pilot film was drawn up, and a director and co-producer chosen. Consulting with research associates and advisors, the filmmakers narrowed down the list of subjects to two women and settled on a treatment on Wyoming homesteader Elinore Stewart to be the pilot script.

"From March to June we completed the research, two scripts and a production plan. In June we submitted a proposal to NEH for pilot film production and additional writing and development money. This included script, budget, talent and time plan."

Four months later, a \$600,000 grant came through to produce a feature length pilot film on Elinore Stewart. It did not include further writing and development funds. Thus, while the filmmakers were fortunate in getting the opening segment produced, the time and effort (to say nothing of public monies) expended on researching, scripting and developing the overall series were effectively wasted.

### ***NORTHERN LIGHTS: Self distribution***

NORTHERN LIGHTS is an example of how imaginative self-distribution can work. John Hanson writes in his paper, "It's a Nice Little Movie, But It Isn't Commercial":

"Instead of opening in New York, getting reviews, moving to the biggest cities in the country, and gradually spreading out

to the medium-sized cities, we did exactly the opposite. The World Premiere was ... in Crosby, North Dakota, a town of 1800 people and the major location for the filming of NORTHERN LIGHTS. We played in the Dakota Theatre on Main Street ... and broke the house record."

In the following months, the filmmakers and associate producer Sandra Schulberg crisscrossed the state promoting the film in what amounted to a "grassroots political campaign." Working with volunteers, they did mailings, spoke before meetings of Sons of Norway, Senior Citizens, Democratic-NPL lunches, high school and college classes, appeared on talk shows, put together radio and TV spots, organized gala opening night ceremonies and receptions.

"All this represented a tremendous breakthrough because no one else had ever done anything like this for an independent feature film in this country, and we were proving that it was viable, at least on home turf."

The movie, Hanson adds, also made money.

Minneapolis, the first test of a wider market, "represented a quantum leap as far as the time and energy that it took to open the film." The filmmakers contacted Scandinavians, political groups, cooperatives, farm organizations, labor groups, schools, film societies — "every conceivable interest group that might embrace the film." Opening night was a sellout, and for the first couple of weeks the film did well. However, blizzards on consecutive weekends, the winter holiday season, and the opening of big pictures like LORD OF THE RINGS kept receipts down. Despite a \$4500 share of the box office take, the \$6000 they had spent to open the film meant that the filmmakers lost money while distributors in Los Angeles remained wary of a film with no sex, no stars, and few prospects of making money.

A ten-page article in *Mother Jones* led to an invitation to the Belgrade Film Festival, where NORTHERN LIGHTS beat out U.S. entries like THE DEER HUNTER and A WEDDING to take third place. "We sold the film to Yugoslav TV, had renewed interest from other European countries, and began to develop an international reputation."

Meanwhile, Seattle exhibitor Randy Finlay took a gamble on opening the film at a small art house near the University and Scandinavian community of Ballard. Giving themselves six weeks to lay the groundwork and with the support of a first-rate publicist, the filmmakers launched a campaign similar to the one they had organized in Minneapolis. This time, however, they received "tremendous media coverage" and "had a real word of mouth going before the film opened."

"According to our time-tested strategy, we organized an opening night gala and held a benefit for the Morse Home. The opening night benefit has become one of the keys to our distribution plan, the use of a benefit for a community

organization or group of people who can identify with the film, use it as a tool, because after all the reason we make films is for them to be used and seen by as many people as possible."

The seven-week Seattle run, grossing nearly \$35,000,

"gave the film a real legitimacy for other exhibitors. We were now having a good run with a strong audience, good response, good reviews, the box office written up in variety each week."

Once again Europe beckoned. Accepted by the "Semaine de la Critique," a prestigious part of the Cannes Film Festival, NORTHERN LIGHTS walked off with the prize for Best First Feature Film, an award that helped clinch \$75,000 in European theatrical and television sales. This coupled with a growing domestic box office, led to bookings at art theatres in San Francisco, Boston, and Los Angeles.

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# **JUMP CUT**

**A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA**

## **Talking to the D.E.C. Films Collective "We don't have films you can eat"**

**by Margaret Cooper**

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A unique Canadian phenomenon, DEC Films grew out of the Development Education Centre, an independent, non-profit collective established in 1971 by New Left activists and researchers interested in providing alternative educational perspectives on Canada, the Third World and a wide range of contemporary issues. DEC Films forms an integral part of the Toronto-based collective, which houses a reference library and a bookstore and produces books, radio programs, slide-tape shows and community workshops. It has become the leading distributor of progressive films in English-speaking Canada since its founding in 1974. Over the past seven years, it has upheld an uncompromising commitment to distribute films about social and political struggles throughout the world as well as accommodate the legitimate needs of national independent filmmaking which critically documents and analyzes Canadian reality.

(DEC is located at 427 Bloor Street W., Toronto M5S 1X7, Canada. 415/964-6901.)

The following conversation between three members of the DEC collective and Margaret Cooper, a film programmer and freelance writer in Toronto, took place over a two year-period in an ongoing dialogue about the work of DEC Films, its distinctive role in English-speaking Canada, and its responsibilities toward independent left Canadian filmmaking.

Margaret Cooper (MC): When you compare DEC Films to most independent distributors, your beginnings seem exceptional. Film acquisition certainly wasn't your primary concern, was it?

Jonathan Forbes (JF): Hardly. As a resource collective, DEC had been surveying books and pamphlets and doing research on Canada's

relationship with Third World countries. In 1974, no Canadian film distributors handled the kind of Third World materials we needed. For our work, we had to import Third World films from the United States. We not only had difficulty getting these films up but faced prohibitive shipping and customs costs. To have films at our disposal, we were actually forced into becoming distributors.

Ferne Cristall (FC): DEC Films started out with a small grant for Third World films from the Canadian International Development Agency, which had money to do educational work on developing nations. After that initial seed money, we became self-supporting. We don't, can't, rely on grants for funding.

MC: Even commercial distributors who are free of U.S. affiliation have a rough time in Canada. How has it been possible for you to keep going for seven years?

JF: The Centre had already developed a network with its educational work and distributing printed material. We also filled a real need for films since universities and political or community groups were tired of having to go to the U.S. for them. We started our collection slowly and developed it film by film. For every film we got, we mapped out where it could be used and how we would distribute it.

MC: Who were your users at the outset?

Glenn Richards (GR): Basically the same as now, with a division between institutions and community groups. We can distribute regularly in institutions because certain sectors in schools and universities, for example, have a continuing interest in such films. Outside this area, people often use films for educational work in a particular community, or for different kinds of public screenings. In DEC Films' early years, some public screenings first interested people in our collection. The Toronto Committee for the Liberation of Southern Africa organized one major series providing us with a local base at the University of Toronto in 1975. They showed many of our films for the first time here and word spread that we had films. In a sense, the network built on itself.

JF: The network also developed beyond Toronto as we did teacher workshops in northern Ontario mostly at the high school level but also for some community colleges. We'd have, for example, a two-day workshop for our films and written materials. We'd also provide a speaker and show the teachers the available resources. Toronto seemed to us well served by different groups; nobody ever went to the smaller cities in the north. These places had no contact with a resource center, so we'd go up, help develop curriculum and show our films. Also teachers would invite outside community people to evening screenings.

FC: Our distribution grew with a strong educational orientation — which it still has.

MC: But you're more focused than other educational distributors. And

you do outreach work which actively responds to the needs of different communities and groups.

GR: Right. We contact community groups and trade unions as a regular part of our workshops and trips outside Toronto. Sometimes we hook up with community activists for a trip. A few years ago, a collective member and a person who worked with Native Canadians went across the country with a car and a projector, stopping in small communities for screenings. They encouraged people to use our material and showed how the material could be used. This was something unfamiliar to a lot of people who had seen only people going to cinemas or high school classes showing films. To use a film differently in a community setting seemed unusual, in the mid70s in many parts of Canada.

That process is still going on but since then there have been some marked changes. Now community groups from all over use our films fairly regularly. Furthermore, they used to look for something to suit a specific interest. Now they draw from other subject areas which raise social and cultural questions we'd like to see presented in a clearer context. People are still learning how to use the material, but with broadened choices.

MC: To what extent have you influenced their receptivity to a broader selection of films?

JF: A lot. And out of necessity, because there's still not enough film material specific to Canada. We draw analogies between a group's particular situation and the materials we have.

MC: For example, you'd encourage a women's caucus from a particular Canadian union to use *ROSIE THE RIVETER* or *BABIES AND BANNERS* for historical examinations of women's role in the work force.

GR: Yes. Or someone interested in a particular industry — let's say, potash in Saskatchewan — might not find anything available on the subject but could use *CONTROLLING INTEREST*, which explores international and domestic relations in a major industry and shows how large companies control huge markets and offer workers low wages.

FC: A good speaker in the right setting can draw specific connections for Canadian users. Our role as distributors then makes us facilitators as well.

MC: How do you decide which films to pick up, especially the foreign films in your collection?

JF: We argue a lot. Every time a film comes in, we argue on the basis of its usefulness and cost. We're still too marginal to be able to spend much money.

BR: Some films take precedence because of need or the subject's



accessibility. Years ago we picked up the Swedish film TUPAMAROS partly to combat local press reports about Tupamaros as bloodthirsty terrorists. Yet sometime later we didn't take a film on East Timor, even though the Canadian media also distorted that liberation struggle. The film was just of too poor quality, not very informative, and with only a limited application. Taking on that kind of film would have been a luxury.

FC: When we acquire films, content plays a prime role. But we want creatively made films, which say something about issues through their form. But we have to make choices on the basis of available money.

BR: On the one hand, we have a definite need to do something; on the other hand, we know our financial responsibilities and liabilities. If the two are incompatible, we could not do the things we really need to and would do a disservice to the people we're trying to support — whether they're involved in liberation struggles abroad or whether they're doing things here.

FC: We place a priority on producer reports and sending money back to producers. Most of our contract agreements stipulate producers receive 50% of net income. That was a political choice for us. Just as we're distributors working in adverse conditions, so are most of the filmmakers we work with, or who use us as their Canadian distributor. We know they need some income to continue doing what they're doing. So we keep our other costs down. Salaries — we all draw the same — stay pretty low, and we do our catalogues as economically as possible.

CR: This small collective, twelve people, operates on many levels, all collectively, and cannot do what other people have to do, such as form support groups for liberation struggles. We are out to make the most of resources which can raise consciousness.

JF: For example, we've started working with INCINE in Nicaragua and Comu-Nica in New York to do English versions of some Nicaraguan newsreels and documentaries.

MC: So you acquire films to fill already existing needs?

BR: Also to move into areas which the groups and communities we service have not fully explored, such as cultural questions. Over the past two years, we've been getting films in this area, such as the West German film, JOHN HEARTFIELD — PHOTOMONTAGIST.

FC: HEARTFIELD represented a conscious decision to break into new territory.

BR: As we tried to define areas in which to expand, we felt a need to deal with the cultural aspect of people's lives concretely. A film like HEARTFIELD counters the Hitler nostalgia vogue with little known information about an antifascist artist and his work, and at the same time explores the process of his art. Since getting HEARTFIELD, we've

moved into features like NORTHERN LIGHTS and WOBBLIES, and culturally based shorts which deal with social and political problems, like DREAD BEAT AN' BLOOD, the British film about Linton Kwesi Johnson.

MC: Has the "expanded territory" changed your user situation? Certainly the films you've just mentioned can work in a variety of settings for different purposes. I can easily see DREAD BEAT used with reggae features.

EC: We've had an increase in public screenings, with libraries, film societies, even museums making more use of our films.

MC: This probably has some connection with an interest in the independent feature and feature documentary movement. As part of a collective, you have to consider DEC as a whole in your decisions — such as moving into feature or cultural subjects. How does the entire collective participate in the film section's activities?

JF: Obviously other DEC members use the films, quite often in educationals. That's the most direct contact.

BR: Also people from the rest of the collective sit on the acquisitions committee to select films.

FC: That's a working committee, not just for decision-making.

BR: It tries to call in as many people as possible to test reactions to a film we're thinking of picking up, including people outside the collective who have an interest in the film's subject. For a film about Jamaica, let's say, we'll invite people from Toronto's Jamaican community as well as knowledgeable non-Jamaicans to a screening to discuss that film's potential use.

JF: We also get tips about films as people in the extended collective as well as people outside DEC come across something they think would be appropriate for us.

BR: Once a week we all meet to discuss what we're doing on a day-to-day and long-term basis, so there's a dynamic relationship with the entire collective. To some extent the collective's activities are integrated; to some extent they're separate. All the administrative work with the film collection — cleaning, shipping, booking, accounting — that's our responsibility. But everybody has the responsibility to do the Centre's work. Each of us spends a week doing front desk, answering the phone, and opening mail. If one of us goes to another province, that person will check out radio stations to see if any of our books interest people there. There's a give and take all the way. With the films, the collective takes a serious look at what we propose and then participates in the general discussion.

MC: You distribute many films which are not available elsewhere in

Canada. Do you try to make sure that people don't book films and then use them in ways that are diametrically opposed to your goals and the purpose of the films?

BR: In one case, a military institute wanted to book a Latin American film. Obviously, we did not give it to them. The thing is, we're trying to provide a certain kind of education but we cannot maintain total control over it. What if someone buys a print, let's say, of *THE TRIPLE A*, the anti-junta film about the effects of the '76 coup in Argentina, and uses it as an example of leftist propaganda film?

MC: Or if some local white racists try to show *DREAD BEAT* to warn against Toronto Blacks.

FC: I think misuse like that rarely happens. Remember we know our network, and we're talking about a pretty small market within a small population. Canada is geographically huge, but there are only about 17 million English-speaking Canadians.

BR: With some of the recent acquisitions, of course, there's less danger of misuse. Also films like *ROSIE THE RIVETER* or *HEARTFIELD* speak for themselves. You can disagree with what they say but you can't dismiss them. Users will have different approaches to our material but I can't overemphasize the fact that we don't have films you can eat. You can try, but they'll give you indigestion.

MC: I know that you encourage open, active screenings for your films whenever possible. Do you also encourage an active demystification of film and filmmaking in these situations?

FC: We've considered it an important role to teach some of our users film technology — even at the most primitive level, such as how to handle a print or what to do when the film breaks. In some cases, with community groups we've been able to get into what makes a particular film work and how it does what it does.

BR: We have different backgrounds in relation to film. I got interested in film and filmmaking as an art student before I became involved in politics. For Jonathan and Ferne, it was the reverse: they were politicized first. We've grown to put the two together — to put filmmakers in touch with the people who use their films and vice versa; to present a film and discuss what is in the film and how such a film is made. You know, the whole thing: what the filmmaker wanted to do, what happened to the film afterwards, or how to creatively present ideas through certain forms. For example, in Film Forums we helped sponsor in Toronto in 1975, we started out with local filmmakers and invited them to participate in discussions with the audience. The next year, when we had access to some Chilean films for a weekend festival which took place at a downtown repertory house, the Lumière, we got Chileans who'd been involved with film work to take part in the discussions. At that time we were part of a network which Andre Paquet had helped set up from Montreal with tours for foreign filmmakers from Third World

countries. So we managed to work with films not yet in Canadian distribution.

MC: Since the mid-70s Toronto seems to have had a consistently good audience for public screenings of Latin American films — mainly because of the impact of Latin American refugees on the city's activists and its politicized left. I know that the same hasn't been true for domestic-issue films, such as films about organized labor and Canadian workers. Was this the case with your Forums involving labor films?

JF: Yes. The programs oriented toward unions and working people were the least well attended.

FC: Also when our film section started in 1974 and began these forums we were pretty inexperienced in our contacts with unions. Only a few years later, after we'd really developed our collection of films on labor and work, did unions begin using our films and become aware of the extent of our resources. Trying to do educationals within the context of organized labor has also helped us increase union access.

JF: It's taken time to build this part of our network. Much of the labor movement in English-speaking Canada has been tied to the New Democratic Party (a minority opposition party with a moderate Social Democrat orientation), and we're not affiliated with the MOP or with any party. Unions mistrusted us at the beginning because we couldn't be placed. We weren't affiliated but an independent group.

MC: Some of your films also critique business union practices and U.S. domination of Canadian industrial unions, so I don't suppose they go over too well in certain sectors of organized labor. But as a trade unionist I can certainly see a real need for some of these films among the indigenous Canadian unions as well as among the reform groups in other unions.

FC: That kind of interest is really picking up now and should become stronger as we develop this part of our collection.

MC: How easy is it for you to get the films you want?

JF: Ten years ago, compared to Europe, Canada was quite wealthy, although not now. People still assume there's lots of money here. We have to explain that we have a small market scattered across an immense area, and for most of the films, shipping charges use up almost half the rental. We do try to develop a good relation with our filmmakers. They then can tell other filmmakers that we've done well by them over the years but that we can't pay a lot for films.

BR: In theory, we understand that filmmakers want to maximize the potential of their films and push internationally for non-exclusive distribution contracts. But Canadian audiences can't always support more than one distributor for progressive left films. If you diversify the market too much, you create fragmentation which prevents Canadian

distributors from making a go of it. So we have to get the Canadian distributor's side of the story out for our contracts on foreign films.

MC: I think your point's well taken but I also believe that Canadians can support more than one distributor for films which have a wide circulation. Especially if a distributor has only a few prints of these films and print damage from extensive use may result in the shelving of some prints. Between here and the west coast, there should be room for two distributors for some films, don't you think?

JF: Actually, that's already happened. Idera, in British Columbia has decided that to be a viable film distributor, they have to be able to distribute outside their province. They have agreed to raise their rates to give a fair return to the filmmaker, and now we're looking at getting joint exclusive with them on distributing a number of films across Canada.

FC: A few films we're getting now have contracts saying, "Exclusive joint distribution with Idera if interested."

MC: Will you be splitting up geographic areas?

JF: No, the distribution is open at this point. At first we thought there was room for only one distributor, right? And now we know there's room for two. Since other people in the Western provinces are beginning to consider being distributors, we have to consider the problem of whether we're going to have one distributor in the West or whether there's going to be regional distribution.

FC: Another problem is setting English-language films. Arrangements with U.S. and British and Australian distributors take time. It's also tough to initiate acquisitions when we find a file we'd like to have which isn't in an English-language version.

GR: In getting films through the United States, you're also talking about a lot of Third World films. The U.S. distributors have internegatives which we can draw on, whereas in Europe you have to buy into an interneg. So there it costs maybe twice as much to start — and the cost is prohibitive.

MC: Outside of print sales to schools and public libraries, you don't have access to some of the sales areas that would help expand the audience for your films while also bringing in money. English-language TV, for example, sees itself well served by government-produced films — whether it's a case of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation airing its own productions or airing work acquired from the National Film Board.

FC: The NFB, that sacred cow, is well respected in many countries because it subsidizes filmmakers. But the NFB has a strong bias. And it creates serious problems for independents and totally cuts out people trying to work like us. The NFB sells its films for the cost required to make the print, so people rent or buy NFB films because of the low rates.

Some libraries even have to buy a certain number of NFB films to meet a quota.

GR: In some areas the library system and the NFB distribution system are one and the same.

JF: People phone up and say, "Why should I pay \$50 to rent such-and-such film when I can get one just like it for free from the Film Board?"

GR: Only it isn't "just like it." Distinctions become blurred because of people's financial concerns. A school board can acquire fifty films from the NFB for the same price that they can get twenty from us, so they expand their collection from the Film Board, a state-run monopoly.

JF: Young filmmakers become co-opted as they go to the Board for steady work. Nine out of ten films they'll make at the Board are made specifically for government agencies or private corporations, which subsidize the NFB budget. To top it all off, the NFB has a ready-made distribution network, with offices abroad, which can carry on circulation of the films.

FC: The NFB does subsidize some filmmakers doing independent work, but the percentage is extremely small.

MC: What about the reputation built up by the now defunct Challenge for Change program? That was supposed to bring filmmaking to the people.

GR: Its "radically innovative approach" duplicated early work done in the Soviet Union with the Kino train. And in reality it addressed itself largely to middle class concerns, even though it sometimes dealt with isolated examples of working class individuals or people on welfare. It went, for example, to small towns and showed that people had no sewer system. Middle class people got together, made a videotape and pressured a government agency so that the town got a sewer system. But Challenge for Change wouldn't deal with the social reality of issues like massive unemployment in the Maritimes.

JF: The NFB won't even do a historical film like UNION MAIDS, which is analytical and critical and open-ended. It never will, but it will keep the people who would be busy with other projects.

FC: And it gets those people attuned to a serious style of social, documentary, a style that pervades English-language production at the Board even in the best films. The English productions travel most. The French section has a very different history. It quite often does rather different work, so it doesn't really figure in here.

GR: The NFB's good films have been done despite the Film Board, which even at the start had a social democratic position on the working class. It allied itself completely with whatever government happened to be in power in this country.

To get back to Challenge for Change, look at THINGS I CANNOT CHANGE, one of the earliest films in the program, about a Montreal welfare recipient who couldn't make ends meet. When the film was shown abroad, foreign audiences thought it was wonderful that a state-run film institution would make a film about poverty. In fact, when you use the film in a Canadian context, all you create is a sense of pessimism.

We don't have a real solution but we know that for a long time the NFB has been taking Canadian filmmakers who might be making the kind of films we can distribute — films on the order of some of the recent documentaries made by independents in the States — and turning them into uncritical creators of seamless films.

MC: You've just brought up a most pressing issue for Canadian distributors: developing an independent film tradition with a progressive orientation in English-speaking Canada.

GR: It has something to do with the state of the Canadian left. The fact that social democracy is stronger here than, let's say, in the United States actually creates more problems for us than it solves.

MC: We have a national tendency to breed "grant junkies." People outside the country, especially in the United States where government funding at the federal and state levels came in only recently and is now on its way out, look North and think things are wonderful here because we have federal grants for independent filmmakers through the Canada Council and we have arts council grants in each province. Sure, they're a big help, even if there's less money now than there was a few years ago. But they can also work to our disadvantage. Some people, filmmakers with a good sense of film form, spend more time on grant applications than on films. Others draw a complete blank at the prospect of facing some other way to finance their work. Ultimately, it breeds a kind of "grant-itis" which isn't always compatible with promoting social change.

JF: We're not sustained by grants, and few of the Canadians whose films we distribute have been able to depend on them exclusively.

MC: As "mavericks," how do you view your role in helping to promote or develop independent left filmmaking? Do you think that money could be generated independently for the kind of films we've been talking about?

FC: That depends. If you decide, for example, to make a film on work, it's not likely that a union will offer support unless you make the film for a union. At least, not in the same way that U.S. independents have managed to get union money for some of their films.

JF: What about A WIFE'S TALE?

FC: One of the most interesting things about the film was the way in which organized labor, women's groups and individuals across the country worked together to help its production.

MC: What A WIFE'S TALE had going for it from the start, I think, was a subject which touched a lot of people. The 1978 INCO strike was one of the most important labor struggles in recent history and it raised issues which became well known across the country.

JF: That's why we made it one of our projects and spent time working with the filmmakers to reach different community groups and individuals to fund the film

FC: Now we're trying to help with international distribution.

MC: Here's a demonstration of active collaboration between distributors and filmmakers to promote what needs to be done.

FC: We've wanted to do that, and A WIFE'S TALE gave us the opportunity. Obviously we'd get involved. We'd already been involved with the Sudbury community where the strike took place. DEC published a book written by a collective member, about INCO's involvement in Sudbury called *The Big Nickle*. DEC also helped produce a videotape about Sudbury and the strike, called WINDING DOWN, and had done workshops on the strike. We knew the filmmakers. It seemed a logical extension to help with the film.

BR: It's also very close to our hearts at DEC because it challenges fixed notions on the left and in the trade unions from a socialist-feminist perspective.

FC: To promote the film in Toronto promotion meant arranging for one of the filmmakers to come and work with us at a salary to do the premiere showings here. We also involved local women's organizations who'd supported the making of the film to get them to incorporate the film in their work.

CR: A WIVES TALE gave us our first taste of a different kind of public exhibition. It also provided insight into new ways to promote our films and involve community groups in public exhibition. The people who run a downtown cinema made their theatre available for four screenings over a two-week period. The first week the film played to pretty skimpy audiences. But by the second week, people lined up outside the theatre. We now feel confident that more of our films can have the same effect if we actively involve our audience.

MC: Without the Festival cinema, which has a central location and is one of the few independently owned theatres in town, I don't think you'd have done as well.

JF: Having access to a screen and getting good projection in a theatre space for public exhibition present real problems for us.

MC: You mean on an ongoing basis. A theatre like the Festival can't really afford, to depart too much from regular art house programming because after all, it's caught up in its own struggle bucking U.S. chains



and block bookings of U.S. products.

BR: Ideally we'd like a community cultural center.

FC: That's how we envision DEC in the future. We have a library, a bookstore and videotape facilities. Having a small cinema nearby or on the premises would be a natural development.

BR: Especially since we're planning to do more public screening on the order of what we started last winter with our "Reel to Real" series.

JF: That grew out of our experience with A WIFE'S TALE.

FC: When we started thinking of "Reel to Real" as a new cinema of solidarity project, we thought it would be exciting. We chose the films from new acquisitions, things we felt deserved theatrical presentation, and approached the same cinema we'd used for A WIVES TALE about renting the theatre for ten Sunday afternoons. Then we went to groups whom we thought would have specific interests in the films: an alternative cultural magazine, a left community newspaper, a Native Canadian school, the International Women's Day Committee, an inner city Black activist band and a research group which publishes material on Latin America. All of the groups became really keen on the project. We met regularly to plan the series and then promoted it collectively and individually. DEC did a newsprint flyer for the entire series and each group did a separate flyer for its program, with probably 15,000 promotional flyers circulating around Toronto as drop-offs and mailings.

OR: A good example would be the BLACKS BRITANNICA and DREAD BEAT AN' BLOOD screening. It was a mixed media presentation because the sponsoring group, the Guyap Rhythm Drummers, performed as well. Then the Guyap talked about the problems presently facing Toronto's Black and West Indian communities.

JF: As a cultural event, it had a real political focus. The films deal with the oppression of Blacks in Britain, and the Drummers had recently been harassed and raided by the city police.

FC: There were other developments from our work with the Guyap which had positive results. The two publications which sponsored other screenings in the series came into contact with the Drummers at one of our planning sessions. They eventually did feature stories on their problems with the police.

MC: So the series brought together some common interest groups who may have been previously working in isolation from each other.

GR: And it developed more community contacts for us. The spin-off is the number of people who've seen the films in the cinema setting and then have gone on to use some of the films themselves in other public settings. Other groups who don't have financial resources are starting to

pressure public libraries to purchase prints from us. That would mean that free library prints will be accessible to people we can't serve because we have to charge rentals.

MC: What about the economics of "Reel to Real"? Did the series pay for itself?

FC: The theatre rental and fees for house manager and projectionist came to \$300 each Sunday. One half of that amount came off the top of the gate. From what remained, 50% went to the sponsoring group. With the rest DEC paid its own film rentals, the other half of the cinema rental, and the production of the series flyer.

MC: Did the series break even?

OR: Not completely, if you consider that we eventually lost about \$340. The sponsoring groups did pretty well, however, when you consider they didn't have any cash outlay.

MC: What about your own labor? How did that figure in?

FC: We put a hell of a lot of time and energy into "Reel to Real" and didn't get any financial return on it. So in a sense, none of our labor costs were covered. And the amount of time we put into the series did make our other distribution work suffer. During the winter, for example, we received a number of new films which we weren't able to promote as well as we'd have wanted.

GR: The problem with "Reel to Real" was the same problem which has often come up with similar short-term projects. 't was difficult to get a coordinating committee to carry out the work we could do because of our experience. For one thing, the sponsoring groups did not usually work full-time as groups, and their members had outside jobs. Or else the groups formed volunteer ad hoc committees. It was right for us as the facilitators to do what we did. But financially, over a four-month period the additional workload became a real burden.

MC: When you do this kind of program again, will you consider getting paid for your labor?

OR: Yes. Now that something like "Reel to Real" has shown it can work, sponsoring organizations may be willing to share the finances. As it was, some, of the groups involved had absolutely no money. They were uneasy about raising, let's say, \$150, for the whole thing might go bust and nobody come. None of us knew what was going to happen.

JF: Remember, we conceived "Reel to Real" and started organizing it not more than eight weeks before the series started.

MC: Are there other lessons from "Reel to Real"?

JF: Well, we got a heavy dose of the anxieties which plague people who program regular public screenings, especially over equipment

breakdowns.

OR: The more sparsely attended screenings showed which groups presently do not have a broad community base.

MC: We were talking earlier about ways of promoting critical left tradition in Canadian independent film. To my way of thinking, "Reel to Real" was a good way of getting film users to support the screenings and the films in a fairly creative way. That kind of support should encourage filmmakers here in their work.

OR: There was a much tighter integration of users, distributors and, in the case of some of the locally produced films like, DENE NATION or FOR TWENTY CENTS A DAY, the filmmakers themselves. It may even have implications for some institutional film users across the country whose financial resources are starting to dry up. Maybe they should consider going directly to the people who want to see films.

JF: DEC wants to work with people across the country who can get communities to support these films in public exhibition. When that's at the integrated level as in "Reel to Real," audience response can't help but encourage more filmmaking activity.

FC: Especially if filmmakers build into this network, like the people who made A WIFE'S TALE. Actually, for DEC, this really just means a new twist on what we started out doing years ago. Our collection has grown, our users have increased and diversified, and we've gone through a number of changes. It's a process that's ongoing, but with a basic consistency as to what we do and how we do it. It will be exciting to see what happens next.

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### *We Are the Guinea Pigs* Three Mile Island continues

by Doug Eisenstark

from *Jump Cut*, no. 28, April 1983, pp. 40-41

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WE ARE THE GUINEA PIGS is a recent documentary film directed by Joan Harvey about the nuclear power industry, the nuclear arms race, and specifically about the Three Mile Island accident in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The film opens with the residents of Harrisburg telling about the events surrounding the accident. The film then moves to interviews and statements by nuclear power proponents and antinuclear trade unionists and scientists. As well as discuss nuclear power, these speakers often address the nuclear arms race and its relationship to the government and utility companies. A kind of filmic debate is made possible by intercutting the different interviews with each other. This editing is often quite quick, and the less-than-consistent film quality makes viewing the film somewhat tiring. Interspersed throughout the film is a rock band, Fourth Wall Repertory, whose antinuclear lyrics presumably reflect the filmmaker's own views.

WE ARE THE GUINEA PIGS begins with the subjective accounts of Harrisburg residents. These testimonies tell of radiation sickness, plant and animal life dying, and of mutations and deformities occurring in livestock after the near meltdown of the Metropolitan Edison power plant. Many of the interviews are with young parents, often times shown holding their children. They tell of the illnesses their kids have suffered and the hopelessness they feel when faced with the mass of contradictory information they have been given. A local pediatrician expresses how difficult it is to tell parents that their children are contaminated with radiation at a dangerously high level.

The most articulate speaker in the first section of the film is a ten-year old boy who grimly gives the facts of his illness at the time of the accident. He makes comparisons to the official estimates of what a "safe" illness is. The government says he "safely" could have been sick with radioactive iodine for an hour, but he remembers his symptoms lasting for over eight hours. He looks in the direction of the power plant and says that he is worried. The danger to children, who are more

vulnerable to radiation than adults, is not only one of dying during an accident or in their lifetimes by the effects of cancer. It is also a danger of irreversible chromosomal damage that may adversely affect their children, grandchildren, and succeeding generations. Children then are the most innocent victims of the dangers of the nuclear industry. As one parent says in the film about her preteen daughter, "How do you tell her she can't have kids because of Three Mile Island?"

The extent of the accident at Three Mile Island has been consistently covered up from the first day of the accident. *WE ARE THE GUINEA PIGS* tells us that the accident was made known to the public on that day only because an amateur radio operator happened to be monitoring communications from workers within the plant. *WE ARE THE GUINEA PIGS* takes on the utility company experts. By intercutting their statements with those of antinuclear activists, it shows that the Pennsylvania region and the rest of the world was and continues to be dosed with radiation from Three Mile Island. The film tells us that the power plant is neither in cold shutdown nor in a dormant state. It continues to emit radiation to this day.

At one point in the film Dr. Helen Caldicott responds to a statement by a utility spokesperson concerning the amount of radiation released during the accident. She says that if this radioactive chemical were released in the amounts mentioned, it would be enough to poison half of the United States population lethally. Even now the plant must often release radiation and eventually rid itself of a million gallons of radioactive water. When gases are intentionally leaked, it is often done secretly at night or in the rain. This is done so that the radiation will not be detected in the atmosphere but instead fall quickly and heavily on the area surrounding Harrisburg. The danger from Three Mile Island continues. Its contents will be lethal to life forms for half a million years. Because another accident at another power plant is almost certain, the film rightfully argues that it is imperative to close all nuclear facilities immediately and begin to systematically decommission them before more radioactive wastes are produced.

Halfway into the film a woman steelworker appears briefly in what appears to be the middle of a lucid and militant talk about profits, nuclear power, and, explicitly named, capitalism. Her statements are cut at this point, and John Goffman picks up the theme of profits but not capitalism. Although the steelworker appears again briefly, her rap has been quickly diverted to what sounds like a consumer's dissatisfaction with one particular product, nuclear power. The film talks vaguely about profits and "bringing control back to the people." It begins but does not follow through on an anti-capitalist analysis that would place the nuclear industry in economic and ideological terms and would explain its sudden rise and relative "success." In this way the film cannot address the existing and future strategies needed to combat the current disastrous situation.

*WE ARE THE GUINEA PIGS* is an important film that gives scientific

but not necessarily political fuel to the antinuclear movement. The film is clearly an antinuclear propaganda, informational, and agitational vehicle. Yet its usefulness to activists and to those as yet unconvinced remains questionable. The film fails to find a core to build its argument from. Massive amounts of scientific evidence are presented as well as emotional first-hand testimony, economic analysis, and, for the musically inclined, a rock and roll band. One feels that the film attempts a comprehensive look at the nuclear industry by showing something of everything. In a sense, this scattershot approach is the result of the many-faceted antinuclear movement, which is made up of those doing scientific research, community and labor organizing, and civil disobedience, forming a loose political base. With its resources and access to these groups, WE ARE THE GUINEA PIGS could have attempted to tie some of these elements together in a cohesive manner. Instead the film puts forward a liberal politics and a manic intensity, as if we were discovering the dangers of nuclear power for the first time. This is unnecessary as activists know most of the background information. For those who are undecided about the issues, too much is presented too fast for particular facts to be retained. Unfortunately, the ninety-minute film does little to convince us that documentaries don't have to be boring and tedious. WE ARE THE GUINEA PIGS can be seen as a complementary film to the Green Mountain Post films, LOVEJOY'S NUCLEAR WAR and THE LAST RESORT (JUMP CUT, No. 12/13 and No. 24/25), which present antinuclear activism within a limited political context.

If WE ARE THE GUINEA PIGS has an overview, it is that of the Fourth Wall rock band, which moves politics into a poetic rage. The band is shown at what appears to be a number of rallies and benefits. I say "appears to be" because these rallies are rarely pictured. This is also true when Michio Kaku, John Goffman, Helen Caldicott, or physicist Daniel Pesello are shown interviewed in the midst of a rally or seen addressing an invisible crowd. The failure of the camera to turn on its axis and show the political organizations necessary to combat the nuclear industry is to implicitly undercut the activist groups' importance. In this way the film has placed itself outside of the organizations. WE ARE THE GUINEA PIGS seems to want to totalize the issues in a way that must ignore political organizations, which necessarily must be specific in their analysis and objectives in order to be effective. Perhaps if the film had attempted to integrate the antinuclear movement within the film, the audience could be given some sense of organizational strength rather than once again having many experts paraded before us to decide our fate.

The antinuclear movement has been progressing politically to address the issues of imperialism (concerning itself, for example, with uranium mining in South Africa and on Native American land in the United States) and workers' safety and jobs both in nuclear plants and in the mines. The United Mine Workers sponsored a demonstration in Harrisburg mourning the second anniversary of the Three Mile Island accident. The dominant chant of the marchers that day was "No Nukes,

No Wars, U.S. out of El Salvador!" Labor groups have in the past and are continuing to organize around nuclear issues. WE ARE THE GUINEA PIGS interviews many labor leaders, which is in itself a reflection of the antinuclear movement's conscious attempts to reach beyond a middle-class constituency. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, itself has a very strong antinuclear community. Its effects are undoubtedly seen in the film as the filmmakers interview a well-informed population.

"When a ten-year-old kid can talk about the potential effects of radioactive iodine on his body you know he didn't learn about it from Metropolitan Edison."

There are over seventy nuclear plants in the United States alone. The nuclear industry and the government have been pushing nuclear plants abroad as a way to stabilize the sagging industry here. In the 1950s the electric industries were unwilling to invest in nuclear technologies but were essentially bribed by the government, which needed nuclear plants to produce nuclear arms. The various companies which build and maintain nuclear plants can turn a profit only because of heavy government subsidies and protective legislation such as the Price-Anderson Act, which makes atomic plants virtually exempt from liability for damages. Each of these power plants must eventually be dismantled. They become so completely and thoroughly radioactive that they are unserviceable. WE ARE THE GUINEA PIGS does little more than make these and other facts known. The means to a world free from the nuclear nightmare remain unexplored. Despite its complex form, WE ARE THE GUINEA PIGS turns out to have nothing more to say than a simple slogan, but the message is both clear and powerful: Stop nuclear power and stop nuclear armaments!

## **Afterword**

Since the writing of this article in the summer of 1981 some developments have led to different directions in the antinuclear struggle.

The first is that for the United States and most of Europe the construction of power plants per se has been effectively killed by the antinuclear movement and the incompetence of the energy industry itself. While isolated plants are continuing to be considered, the grand plan for nuclear energy as a major power source is over. Instead, within the United States and Europe the nuclear czars are trying to export their plants to Third World countries. West Germany, for example, is supplying Brazil with many new plants despite protests in both countries.

In the summer of 1982 worldwide attention was given to the United Nation's Second Special Session on Disarmament. Called by a majority of Third World countries, it was the catalyst to involve Third World people around the world in the disarmament struggle. With this, the antinuclear movement broke out of its single-issue politics. Voices in the United States came from solidarity movements concerned with Vieques

(Puerto Rico), Latin America, and Africa. SSD II itself saw a disaster within the UN due to U.S. blocking, but large rallies on June 12 allowed many groups to speak out against the U.S. export of nuclear and conventional arms.

Particular attention must be given to the struggle of Native Americans in North America, as uranium deposits have been found in the Southwest on Native American lands. Native Americans will be forced to leave these lands for the uranium that will be destined for nuclear bombs in Reagan's domestic military buildup or export to foreign dictatorships for nuclear power plants.

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* Invisible working women

by Sue Davenport

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"We thought we were the 'new women.'"

"We were the interlopers. We thought we were at the beginning of our stories, the men were at the middle or end of theirs."

"We all loved one another."

So say the women in the 60-minute documentary, *THE LIFE AND TIMES OF ROSIE THE RIVETER*, by Connie Field. In an hour of vibrant feminist filmmaking, five women who worked in industrial production in World War II reflect on their wartime experiences, highlighting the unusual working conditions that the high-pressured war production drive created for women. Three black women and two white, these "Rosies" came from divergent backgrounds: Illinois and Arkansas farms, Brooklyn and Detroit. The film projects the women being interviewed in their present home, job, or neighborhood, some posed against an industrial background reminiscent of their WWII jobs in factories and shipyards.

Government, industry, and newsreel film captured the high spirits, skilled work, and camaraderie of the 2.5 million women who went to work in wartime industry and the popular imagination with the symbols of Wanda the Welder and Rosie the Riveter. This official media treatment of the women workers provides the other major theme of the film. The film cuts back and forth between the women's personal views as expressed in typical documentary interviews and the official ideology of the wartime period as revealed in propaganda films. A vast gap appears between the women's experiences and the official version.

The widely propagated notion that the U.S. woman is born to be a housewife has been slowly undercut by the rising participation of women in the paid workforce and changing family patterns throughout the twentieth century. However, deeply held cultural values die slowly

and serve to mask and mystify people's actual experiences, and thereby, their consciousness. Large groups of U.S. women — rural women, minority women, urban white working class women — have always worked longer and harder throughout their lives than their middle class counterparts. The social model of woman as housewife and mother, with leisure for bridge games and community volunteering, derives from aristocratic lives. It allows middle class women and some working class women to imitate upper class women. But it masks the fact that most women do extensive unpaid labor in their own homes, and many women face the "double day" of unpaid labor at home and paid labor outside the home. Official WWII propaganda and commercial advertising ignored the invisible working women of United States. Forties media focused on the pert, cheery, white housewife, only too happy to serve her men and her country "for the duration." How political and economic forces perpetuate traditional bourgeois values through social relations and culture is an important analytical goal for radical films. *ROSIE THE RIVETER* takes on this task for working women in the WWII period.

However, *ROSIE THE RIVETER* does not always adequately distinguish the differences among women who became wartime Rosies. In my research on women who went into defense and heavy industry during WWII, I found several different groups entered the labor force. Some women came from traditional AFL craft union families and entered the industrial labor force "for the duration," while assuming they would return to traditional housewife status at the war's end. These women accepted the AFL's long-held position that the working man should earn enough to be able to keep his wife at home, and they saw the war as a temporary displacement. Another group of women came from the middle class and tended to get into war work from a spirit of adventure, discontent with their situation, and desire for change.

In contrast, others were working class women who moved into industrial jobs from years of experience in other working class jobs such as waitress and textile mill hand. For them, higher pay and union protections were primary motivations. And other working class women came to war work from different strata; they had been at home before and were new to industrial work. Yet others were the wives and daughters of industrial workers with a strong sense of unionism and roots in the communities surrounding the plants, mills and shipyards.

For the women in *ROSIE THE RIVETER*, war production work was a move up in the labor force, not a temporary step out of the home. They were already responsible for a major share of their family's income. In defense work they could earn more in one day than they had ever earned in a week. Defense work was an opportunity that challenged the traditional sexual division of both education and labor that prepared women for menial work. Instead, women learned skilled mechanical and technical work, earned high wages, enjoyed job mobility, and worked "union." Women in basic industry were often entering companies with young active locals of the new national unions of the C.I.O., created in the militant struggles of workers in the depths of the 1930s Depression.

As these women knew too well, women's lot in the U.S. capitalist economy was, typically, to work in low-paying, low-skilled, dead-end, "feminized" and non-unionized jobs. For black women the situation had been the worst, as racism combined with sexism in the hiring patterns of corporate employers to place them in the dirtiest, meanest, and lowest paying jobs, whether in the service sector (servants, waitresses, laundresses) or in factory work. War work was a challenge and an opportunity.

Official media stressed the temporary aberration of women from the norm of the housewife, who would be only too happy to return home to fulltime housewifery and mothering after the war. The MARCH OF TIME heralded the "hidden army" of housewives eager to do their patriotic duty as "kitchen mechanics," giving up their irons for welding torches and skirts for overalls. Commercials rushed to reassure the hardworking women that they were still feminine after all, especially if they used the right soap, hand cream, and perfume for their dates after work. A popular song like "Minnie's in the Money" captured the women's enthusiasm for their greater financial independence, especially after the hard times of the Depression, as well as their vital role as consumer in the economy.

Yet for the women in THE LIFE AND TIMES OF ROSIE THE RIVETER — Wanita Allen, Lynn Child, Gladys Becker, Lola Weixel, Margaret Wright — the war work was the beginning of their stories. The mass demobilization of women out of basic and defense industry as the war was nearing an end came as a rude shock. Nationally, the women had done their jobs well by all accounts, whether by company, government, or union measurement and reports. Nearly three-quarters of all women interviewed, in government, union and public interest surveys, wanted to retain their wartime jobs.<sup>(1)</sup> The women in the film still had major responsibility for providing for family income, and they needed to work. "There was a lot of money around, but it wasn't in our pockets," said one woman. They knew that government wage and price controls have kept wages a lot further down than prices. While some women were kept on in their wartime jobs and others fought and won their right to stay, most were demoted into the feminized sectors of the economy, back to "women's work." After four years of welding and steady attendance at after-work classes, Gladys could find no company willing to hire her as a welder. She became a cook in a school cafeteria for the rest of her working life. No factory in Brooklyn would hire Lola to do her welding that had helped win the war. Her dream was "to make a beautiful ornamental gate. Was that so much to want?"

Another important contribution to our understanding of the actual lives of women that ROSIE THE RIVETER makes is to show how the war work politicized women, making them more conscious about the dynamics of power in United States, be it between the sexes, the races, or social classes. Crossing the traditional sex barrier in the workforce sharpened women's understanding of how the sexual division of labor pitted men against women and created hardship and false ideas in

people's lives. As Lola comments, "Men, had been sold a bill of goods — that the skills were, so hard to learn, that, in fact, could be quickly learned." Yet in the home, traditions persisted with less interruption. As Lola herself says, "I'd go home and cook and clean and do the laundry while my brother lay on the couch. We didn't question it so much then. But I was angry about it for years."

In what is for many viewers the dramatic peak the film, Lynn Child recalled an instance of racial discrimination. Working as the only woman and the only black on a welding crew in a ship's hold, she witnessed a 19-year-old white officer attack a Filipino worker, kicking him repeatedly and shouting racist insults. She swung around threatening the officer with the full flame of her blowtorch if he did not stop his attack. He stopped. Lynn was summoned to the main office. Braced for censure, she was surprised to see her entire crew behind her, to hear the commanding officer fumble with questions probing the incident, and to see the young officer cry. When the supervisor accused her of being a communist, she said that if that's what communists stood for, "Then I'm the biggest communist in the whole world." The story is dramatic, but it also begs the question of the actual leftist political affiliations and sympathies of the Rosies.

Not all unions treated the women workers alike. In some, like the United Auto Workers, United Electrical Workers and the United Steel Workers of America, women were more active both as union stewards and officers and as rank-and-filers pressing sex and race discrimination grievances. Lola explains,

"We started a union at the shop, and we started to wear union buttons. Mr. Kofsky didn't like us anymore. We were no longer his girls. One day we came to work and were locked out ... Black women were paid 5 less per hour. Our union filed a complaint at the-National Labor Relation Board. When we got into the United Electrical Workers Union, we got an 80% raise."

The film suggests that in the manipulation of public images of wartime women, the government, employers and media were pushing hard the traditional view of Woman as Housewife to suppress the runaway implications of women doing men's work so successfully, with the pride and camaraderie that wartime working conditions engendered. If women could master mechanics, blowtorches, and blueprints, what couldn't they master? If women were doing so well with 12 million men away, would they be willing to accept so readily their traditional inferior places — at home, at work, in society?

It is at this point that the film leaves the audience hungry for more. We meet the five women. They are magnificent. We warm to them, care about them, are proud of them, and we sympathize with them. But neither they nor we are allowed to be angry at the forces responsible for their situation, or encouraged to take steps together to deal with the conflicts. We are isolated as viewers from them as subjects, as they are

from each other. This is because the film portrays them as five individual women, unrelated in conscious and collective ways to other workers.

The visuals of the interviews tend to freeze the women in single images — Lola against old brick factories in New York, Lynn in a shipyard, Margaret out her kitchen window looking onto a massive Detroit plant, Gladys deep in an armchair in her house, and Wanita at her desk in the community social service agency where she now works. Visually the women are pinned, alone and in a static situation. They are abstracted from the dynamics of their present lives, as the film creates few bridges from their wartime experience to the present. We see that Gladys Becker worked in a cafeteria for the rest of her working life. We sense the disappointments and inadequacies of that situation, but how did she deal with it? Did these women ever join unions again? How did they relate to the civil rights and black liberation movements? How did they view the women's movement?

In this way, *ROSIE THE RIVETER* is not really about the dynamics of history. The film is polite. It avoids the nitty gritty of the contradictions of capitalism and patriotism, the basic forces which have steadily persisted and shaped U.S. politics throughout the Cold War, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and, now, as reactionary militarism builds a death machine with people's lives. The film does not name the reasons for the women's unusual opportunity WWII as the massive boon to U.S. capitalism, the drive for war profits, the alliance of corporate power and the state, FDR's switch from Dr. New Deal to Dr. Win the War. The film does not probe the contradictions of wartime work for the unions and the workers — the no-strike agreement in return for the maintenance-of-membership contract clause; the loss of overtime pay; the Communist Party's uncritical position toward corporate profits and state policies; the strong wildcat strike movement. *ROSIE THE RIVETER* does not explore the effects of the women's wartime work experience, which persisted in spite of the retraction of opportunity — women's relations with men in the postwar readjustment; changing family life; involvement in community organizations, unions, or the civil rights movement.

*THE LIFE AND TIMES OF ROSIE THE RIVETER* uses the style of several other feminist films of the 1970s. It has interviews with individuals intercut with archival footage over contemporary music and voice, as in *UNION MAIDS* by Julia Reichert, Jim Klein, and Miles Mogleescu, and *BABIES AND BANNERS* by Lynn Goldfarb, Lorraine Gray, and Anne Golden. Both of those films make a stronger case for the collective actions of women, grounding the individuals firmly in a union context. Connie Field emphasized, instead, five individual women, balanced well for racial differences and backgrounds (although the presence of a Latina woman would have broadened the impact of the film). She relies on their strength of character, insight, and story-telling ability, in counterpoint to the official "stories," to involve us in the central argument about the unjust manipulation of women.

It is always a danger for feminist art or politics to focus exclusively on women's issues and not to "greet the world," as it is a danger to personalize history solely in individual lives. Unless women are shown as participants in the social and political struggles in the community, workplace, or home, then, by implication, they are powerless to affect their lives. Within Field's chosen structure of the interview versus propaganda counterpoint, the film could have probed further the social context of women's lives. The film could have lessened their isolation by probing more into the women's shop floor cooperation at work, union activity, and their political thinking. More period footage of unions could have supplemented the interviews. Otherwise, women appear as the victims of history, manipulated by official propaganda, left with nostalgia for golden moments in the past, but unable to take common action to shape their lives.

In fact, research will probably show that WWII production work had an important role in changing many women's perceptions of themselves, their wishes and dreams, their aspirations for themselves and their families, their acceptance of "tradition" and a greater willingness to speak out, joining social organizations and political movements.<sup>(2)</sup> *THE LIFE AND TIMES OF ROSIE THE RIVETER* is a dynamic and informative film about the real lives of working women in United States. It points us in a direction for making more films that strip away the veils of tradition and authority to show the social processes at work in people's lives by which we can and do reshape society.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>. Sheila Tobias and Lisa Anderson, "What Really Happened to Rosie the Riveter?", 1, no 12 (June 1973) 92-97.

<sup>2</sup>. For indications of this see Gerda Lerner, *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973). My own findings along this line appear in Sue Davenport, "A Job in the Mills: Women Workers in Steel Production in the Chicago Area During World War II," unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Illinois at Chicago, 1981.

### Susana

## Photographer's self-portrait

by Claudia Gorbman

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SUSANA is a cinematic self-portrait, from which one can glean the following information. Susana Blaustein comes from Mendoza, Argentina, where her father is a pediatrician and her mother a dentist. Her married sister lives in Sweden; her younger brother and sister Graciela in Mendoza. She left home, lived in Jerusalem for awhile, and now in her twenties, she lives in San Francisco. Graciela has visited her and tried to change Susana, whose lesbianism has been the focus of pain and frustration in relations with her family. Susana takes pictures and has made this film. The "story" is told through voice-over narration, family photos, a variety of old film footage, the director/subject's own photographic work, and filmed interviews of her sister, two former lovers, and herself.

The film begins with a brief series of photographic self-portraits. The first face smiles attractively; the second looks less assertive. In the third, an as-if-candid grimace appears, and the fourth makes Susana's face downright grotesque. This series of photographic portraits provides the kickoff for the cinematic one. Each successive interview will be framed and posed like a separate photo; but also like photos, their juxtaposition causes us to make connections beyond their borders. The photos also prepare a nice structural resonance at the end, where we see another set of photos of Susana — this time posed with another woman in each.

Virtually everyone interviewed talks about Susana in terms of images, or photography in particular. Her partner relates her childhood interest in painting. One ex-lover recounts how Susana defined stages of their relationship by creating or destroying photographic images of her. Another lover describes Susana as not accepting herself but rather having "to be a picture of someone." Graciela holds up to the camera one of her sister's more compelling photographs. It shows Susana sitting at one end of a table set for two, underneath which we see (in a superimposition) the rest of her family. "Whom is she waiting for?" asks Graciela, and we along with her, as though understanding the

photograph will yield the key to the whole Susana mystery.

SUSANA's fetishization of photographic/cinematographic representation makes for an interesting thematic cement to bond its diverse voices and images. One also senses here a Godardian honesty — through reflexivity. We can approach understanding through a series of representations, but "the truth" will always elude us because of the selective and distortive nature of representation itself. Better, then, to acknowledge consciously the "lie" of the medium.

That inaugural progression from sweet to dour in the opening photos, though, remains to be explained. It leads us to suppose that in her uncompromising search for honesty about herself, the filmmaker saw behind a smiling appearance a glum, humorless essence. It's frankly not a pleasant picture to watch. Perhaps its tone arises from an effort to offer a counterpoint to the heroic genre of films about lesbianism. And although it is indeed naive to argue the necessity of "positive images" in every lesbian film, SUSANA causes us to question the political value, at least, of a film showing a lesbian who seems resolutely depressed and which does not provide further insight to make this a situation worth looking at. (We learn nothing, for example, of the cultural specificity of being a lesbian and a Latina. Perhaps her middle-class background hinders her from seeing herself as Latina, which in this country is so often a question of class as well as one of race or ethnicity.) Thus we're led to ask what inspired this film and for what audience it is conceived. The viewer might find SUSANA valid as a personal diary, a sketch of a life at a particular stage, documenting the difficulties and sadness raised within her family over her sexuality and her move away from home. Since she dedicates the film to Graciela, it can be seen as a present given to her sister so that the latter will accept the person behind it too. But its personal, political, and aesthetic dimensions seem at odds. Shown to the public, it runs the danger of being taken as an extended pout, unenlightening for anyone not directly involved.

It seems appropriate to comment on the filmmaker/protagonist as romantic hero. She is the doomed/damned artist, pursuing a quest (for what? stability? peace? identity?). The characteristics of literary romanticism are all there: the quest; "sincerity"; the lone individual at odds with roots, society, and family; the highly personal, confessional, self-indulgent tone and structure; even elements of (geographical) exoticism. We might even suggest that her photographic self-portraits serve as doppelgangers. The doubling theme is further compounded in the final series of photos of Susana paired with various lovers. The final shot, of course, shows a live-action Susana posing with a photograph of herself, implying that she and her double-image will continue to engage in mutual pursuit. Susana has chosen the role of romantic hero, then — but how ill-fitting this role seems for a woman.

Susana does smile. One smile appears in the very first still photograph — a smile that within two shots becomes a grimace and which will not be recuperated. One exception: later we see home movies of Susana with a



Russian boyfriend with whom she once kept company in a vain effort to disprove her homosexuality to herself. The two of them are seen crossing a sunny street. Blaustein has slowed down the footage and reversed the motion, presumably as the filmmaker's symbolic annihilation/reversal of her heterosexual "regression." What remains in my memory, however, is the healthy smile on Susana's face as the reverse motion paradoxically makes the couple look as if they're dancing. It's ironic that in an effort to have us accept Susana as she is, SUSANA offers us no joy in the present and works to evoke nostalgic pleasure in connection with a heterosexual past.

Ultimately SUSANA is a taking of control. Blaustein, arranger and manipulator of images, makes a film to explain her present world. As arranger, of course, she has the last word, and she exercises this prerogative throughout. Emblematic of this tendency is the final scene in which Susana and Graciela converse and come to an understanding about their differences. Graciela, on the left, faces the camera. We may cavil at what she says (she still feels Susana has to "change"). But visually speaking she is defenseless, and we actually tend to root for her as the underdog. Susana, on the other hand, walks into the frame at right and sits in profile. During the dialogue she lights up a cigarette with ceremony and aplomb. She's buoy with the microphone and the cigarette. She gets further advantage from her attire, using the popular lesbian iconography of a dyke-vogue sport cap. Finally she exercises power here as a filmmaker. She ends the interview by walking out of the shot, leaving the camera running on her sister, who remains seated, vulnerable in her inactivity and exposure.

Is this fair? Does Blaustein know how much of herself she reveals in creating this discrepancy between the film's manifest and latent messages and values? How much does our perception of this film — any film — depend on our perception of its intent, its maker's ethos, its social purpose, its cultural-historical context? Such framing questions make SUSANA an intriguing film (with qualifications) with regard to the problematics of feminist criticism.

## **Note**

This review came out of a discussion with K. Boyle, P. Rand, E. Harris, K. Bosley, and T. Haasl. SUSANA is distributed by Women Make Movies, 257 W. 19th St., New York, NY 10011.

### The films of Sharon Couzin Romanticism reconsidered

by Gina Marchetti and Carol Slingo

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Sharon Couzin is a Chicago-based experimental filmmaker whose output since 1970 has been fluid and strong: eleven films completed and one in progress. However, she has yet to gain national recognition from those critics and supporters who deal with the subject of experimental filmmaking. Unfortunately, Couzin's predicament is not unique. Women in all modes of film production have consistently been ignored, undervalued, and misunderstood by film scholars. Her problem is compounded because she lives away from the museum center of the country, New York, and is dedicated to the least "commercial" of all film genres, experimental film.

Since the early days of film history, women have been attracted to the aesthetic potentialities of the medium. But, unable to achieve or reach positions of control and authority within the industry, many have kept a kind of amateur standing, tucked into the category (catch-all) of "experimental." Although still partially segregated by the film culture establishment, this personal, adventurous type of filmmaking has been brought into the "Academy" by the journal *Film Culture*, the Anthology Film Archive, and of course by its most vocal spokesman, P. Adams Sitney. Unfortunately, with a very few exceptions, this has been an association of men, focusing on each others' interests. It has also been a closed group regionally — concentrating on New York work. Although filmmakers working in the Midwest, West and South have established their own festivals and developed regional audiences, the women in this group remain somewhat apart from other women filmmakers. But this situation will probably change.

For the most part, Sharon Couzin works within a tradition of autobiography, personal vision, and imaginative art. Her vision of these things reflects a personal view of this common ground of daily life. As such, Couzin's films can be placed within the tradition of romantic aesthetics, which still outlines the parameters of much contemporary art.

Romanticism as an aesthetic movement developed at the end of the 18th Century, reflecting a shift in Western civilization away from the feudal and into the modern bourgeois era, with its emphasis on individual achievement and acquisition opposed to rank and aristocratic privilege. Outside of questions of blood, lineage and property, the individual began to be considered unique, prized for her/his individuality, originality and singular vision. The personal realm of the home and family and the life of the "ordinary" person began to be considered apt subjects for art. The artist shifted from being a recipient of official favor to embodying "genius," acting as a misunderstood and underappreciated romantic hero, and expressing distinctive feelings and a subjective vision. The artist was allowed to stand apart from society and to criticize it, to examine it in relation to the subjective realm of dream, thought and fantasy. The interior world of the mind became the romantic artist's domain. As Hugh Honour points out in his book *Romanticism*, this sensibility still forms the basis of what we generally regard to be the avant-garde of our art:

“Romantic ideas about artistic creativity, originality, individuality, authenticity and integrity, the Romantic conception of the meaning and purpose of works of art and the role of the artist continue to dominate aesthetic thought. So deeply are they embedded in our attitudes and ways of thinking that we are rarely aware of them. They emerge where least expected. Even the notion of an *avant-garde* marching ahead of popular taste is Romantic in origin.”[\(1\)](#)

Freed from the need for aristocratic patronage and, at least for those women of the privileged class, freed from the worst of domestic and farm labor, women became artists. The 19th Century produced writers such as the Bronte sisters, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Emily Dickinson. Within the writer's private world, women were allowed to express themselves according to Romanticism's aesthetic guidelines: to express their private lives, thoughts, and experiences.

Romanticism actually prizes that position in which most women of our culture find themselves: outside the domain of power, shut into a highly individual world of dreams and fantasies that have not been generally recognized because they remain outside the public, meaning male, domain. This legacy's negative aspect means the individual's exploring her/his interior world may substitute for lack of status and power in the public realm. In addition, Romanticism generally places the individual's problems over social and political concerns. Broader issues are expressed in terms of individual cases; the larger context must be inferred, e.g., as in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.[\(2\)](#)

The contemporary woman who chooses to work within the romantic tradition faces advantages and disadvantages. On one hand, the tradition stresses the artist's role as individual critic of the world, with privilege given to personal interpretation, sharing of the psyche, and autobiographical liberty. Some artists carry this freedom to the point at

which self-criticism disappears, seeing themselves as transcendent heroes or wallowing in private neuroses. The tradition's strengths and weaknesses have an impact on romantically-oriented women artists' work.

In *Visionary Cinema*,<sup>(3)</sup> Sitney argues that an aesthetic position can be traced from 19th Century Romantic poetry through the work of U.S. independent filmmakers such as Maya Deren and Stan Brakhage. In an earlier generation, Deren used her camera as a privileged eye on the mundane world, giving everyday objects a symbolic, dreamlike significance. Likewise she used her body as the focal point of disturbing fantasies (AT LAND, MESHES OF THE AFTERNOON). However, when Sitney writes about Deren's work, he overlooks how she observed women's relationship to dream, fantasy, and these everyday, sexually-determined conditions of life.

Using her own psyche and dance-trained body as tools of expression, Deren makes visual those concerns that are not merely "romantically" individualistic but belong to the fantasies, nightmares and frustrations of many women. Deren explores and justifies both the position of the female artist and the experience of the woman viewer. Perhaps this is the importance of romantic aesthetics to feminism and to women as artists and as audience.

There is only one principal woman "visionary" in Sitney's history. As other male historians have done, he describes U.S. independent filmmakers as principally male. A second history demands to be written, that of all the women working in the autobiographical genre: Marie Menken, Carolee Schneeman, Barbara Hammer, and many others. Here Sharon Couzin's work is important for any discussion of women artists aesthetics which grows out of women's lived experiences in our culture.

In dealing with Couzin's work, we have chosen four films, three which were completed within the last year and an earlier one which has received national and international film festival recognition, ROSEBLOOD (1975). These films display Couzin's considerable technical skill and concentration on detail. She creates with intricately layered images. At a first screening, the viewer may find it impossible to piece together on any but a subliminal level all the subtleties and cross-references. However, unlike the new structural filmmakers who develop complexity for the sake of formal exploration (an interest mainly shared by audiences of other filmmakers), Couzin uses this technique in order to explore the personal and the private.

Probably more than any other Couzin film, ROSEBLOOD is influenced by that tradition in which Maya Deren worked. Couzin makes concrete the fleeting images of subjective experience. Like Deren, she uses a dancer's body to create dream-like impressions, explore a woman's movements in space, and make physical an ethereal world. Also like Deren, Couzin explores dream states, studies the stylized movements of ritual, and symbolically evokes myth. ROSEBLOOD focuses on the sensuality of the female body and on the artist's vision of the relation

between women and nature. Consciousness of the external world of nature leads to a quest for self-awareness. Exploring nature becomes a metaphor for exploring the self and the unconscious. As in a dream, links are formed through the juxtaposition of the body with the imagery of our cultural mythology about female sexuality, forming the basis of ROSEBLOOD's meditation on women, nature, physical movement, and dream.

ROSEBLOOD's rhythm is musical and cyclical. Calm follows climax; lyrical moments follow dramatic ones. The neutral sepia tone of much of the footage is periodically disrupted by color. Key gestures — the turning of a head, the lifting of a arm — are repeated, following this rhythm as if choreographed.

The dancer's body is photographed against, or covered by, flowers, blood, seashells, water, branches. The body merges with its surroundings. Circular shapes and motions metaphorically evoke the cycles of women's lives and the seasons of nature. ROSEBLOOD is in an indirect and nontraditional way a dance. But the movements of this dance are framed and constructed not by the dancer but by the filmmaker, who pieces together gestures of arms and legs to create new forms. At one point Couzin animates torn bits of a photograph of the woman's face, and the photograph reconstitutes itself. The camera moves in relation to the dancer, in and around its subject, frequently distorted by optical effects, the fish-eye lens, kaleidoscopic mattes, and reprinted footage. The dancer's body is captured imitating the trees behind her. Her photograph floats on the surface of water, rephotographed. The filmmaker manipulates the dancer's movements to reflect and interact with both the natural world and cinematic artifice.

ROSEBLOOD as a relatively early work is very much an outgrowth of Couzin's painterly interests. Couzin was originally drawn to films as a way to explore ideas of photographic abstraction, composition, color, light and line and to go beyond painterly considerations into the realm of temporal and spatial manipulation. To this end Couzin uses considerable technical skill.

As a means toward gaining total artistic control, Couzin has mastered the optical printer, which allows her to use double exposure to spatially change images and alter time. The printer allows her to bypass the film-processing laboratory. With this freedom, she can do almost everything in her own home except the final transfers of sound on to image. She can construct within the frame, isolating those elements that interest her. By using step printing, she can relate images to each other through montage.

A TROJAN HOUSE (1977-1981) in its finished form uses some of the formal techniques of ROSEBLOOD to make a concrete, critical statement about the place of the woman artist within the male-controlled art world. Couzin's handheld camera, disturbing juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated objects, fisheye lens perceptions, and complex, unsettling sound track maintain a balance between what is

humdrum reality (the house) and what is threatening nightmare. A TROJAN HOUSE experiments with narrative form in the same way that the contemporary novel has come to be an experiment with words. The sound track carries an intricate mixture of precise description, fragmentary dialogue by unidentified speakers, self-analytical commentary, quotation, poetry, music (principally by Karlheinz Stockhausen), and disjointed image-sound patterns.

The artist-protagonist's relation to the art world is explored through three principal sets of references. The first refers to the anonymous sculptor of California's Watts Towers (in actuality, Simon Rodia). These towers were made from discards, found objects, and junk — much of it domestic in nature. The second reference is to Max Ernst and Rene Magritte, painters, and the blues singer John Lee Hooker (male artists). The third is to potential threats, even violence, and to an obscure California murder story, cast within an unfinished, undefined series of descriptive passages on both sound and image track leading to alternative possibilities. Although Couzin does not reveal the murder victim's identity, the various women shown in the film are put into positions where they might be vulnerable to attack. They must combine the domestic and artistic aspects of their lives. Such a task's difficulties are shown, for instance, in shots of a woman engaging in the particularly rigorous medium of hardwood sculpture. A sequence demonstrating the dangers depicts a rock singer performing with her band while hands hold and display an array of drugs. Anxiety and apprehension are indicated by the camera's forward motion shot through a fish-eye lens and the visual eeriness surrounding familiar objects removed from familiar places.

In contrast, the artist's world within the home/HOUSE is traditionally secure and her role within the family warm and nurturing. Here there is more hope for connections between her traditional domestic-creative role and her artist role "outside." A bond of solidarity is shown between mother and daughter as the adult passes fragments of her (women's) lives to her child: scissors, hammer, photographs, and puzzle — tools of creation in both areas. These become the visual representations of the female bond. In the animated sequence shown, Couzin makes the stuff of the domestic sphere become the material for creative impulse. Using the rotoscope technique, she transforms a chair into a line drawing of itself, into a living animated house.

Couzin sees woman's creativity in a traditionally masculine sphere, however, subject to limitations not yet mastered: as, for example, in A TROJAN HOUSE's references to interrupted or abnormal relations between artists and their own mothers. Magritte's mother committed suicide. Ernst described himself as hatched from an egg. The narrator's mother is said to be "lost." Men are seen as rejecting creativity. As mothers and as artists, women implicitly challenge men's traditionally exclusive right to be creative in the public world. This is something they have yet to overcome, as women overcome the denial of power in the public sphere.

A TROJAN HOUSE provides an elaborate architectural metaphor. It opens with images of fences, arches, doorways, gates and the elaborate colonnades of the Watts Towers with their shiny incrustations. In all senses A TROJAN HOUSE is about structure and building: how lives are ordered, how men and women build forms for themselves to contain and protect them, but also to limit and confine them, to live in and hide. This film maintains this idea by the intertitles which punctuate it: STRUCTURE/ PLACING THE WINDOWS AND DOORS/ STICKS AND STONES/ A FORMAL FAÇADE/ THE HOUSE ALIVE/ PASSAGE/ SYMMETRY RETOUCHE/ ENTOMBED. Couzin elaborates upon architectural forms, such as doorways, arches, windows — all these indicating relationships between interior and exterior space. She moves her hand-held camera up to, around, and through spaces, opening them and linking the literal forms and structures to the relation between interior life and the outer world. The important position of the camera as an eye opening out — either offering a full screen view or limited by the fisheye lens — creates a link between inner and outer life. When the image is rounded and condensed, the space created gives the subjective impression of being seen through the surface contours of an eye.

A TROJAN HOUSE is a self-reflexive work. Not only does it present a generalized portrait of the woman artist, but it specifically deals with Sharon Couzin and her position as filmmaker. Couzin's voice is on the soundtrack. She films herself, demonstrating the camera within a mirror-like doorway. She punctuates the film with shots of herself splicing pieces together to create a self-portrait with the fragments of her life. She paints her face white, reveals her image in still photographs, and like the white plaster bust of an ancient Greek woman seen lying beneath the Towers, becomes part of the narrative and visual structure of A TROJAN HOUSE.

Despite these strong images of an artist creating her art, i.e., creating this film, the ambiguity and apprehension remain. The man, the murderer, puts pieces of her life into his sculpture. Toward the end of the film the narrator intones,

"He, the sculptor, attempts to arrange these [domestic objects] in a logical way ... At some point he is apprehended, or ..."

This line is repeated with different potential endings. We see concrete images of a man on the run and the violence that threatens the woman's life/ work. But she must deal with violence within and without, if she is to succeed in the outside world, even if that means the man will try to enter her house, exploit her, and put her life into his own art.

But if the fictional Sharon Couzin yields some of her cups and souvenirs, it is the real Couzin who completes the film. Women participate in the arts today as never before,[\(4\)](#) and this film represents them. In one sense the creative act depicted in the film is extraordinary, like a bright red apple attached to a barren tree, or the birth of a child — one act



which cannot be usurped. On the other hand, it is as simple and everyday as a child's spherical puzzle or a chair that dissolves into line drawing, or cutout advertisements, which are another way to order domestic life. The title *A TROJAN HOUSE* may, in fact, imply that the house and domestic life can be used as a weapon to enter and conquer a creative domain previously ruled by men.

*DEUTSCHLAND SPIEGEL* (*GERMANY MIRRORED*, 1979-80), even more than *A TROJAN HOUSE* is influenced by the New Novel. It has a convoluted, Borges-like structure and a female narrator, whose tale of an unspecified horror is told in numerous versions, varying in non-specific degrees. Her story concerns a child, a father, and family life threatened by vague militarism and scientific experiments upon people. The visuals, on the other hand, provide concrete references: to war, concentration camps, the Berlin wall, work, consumer products, technology, and fences. Again, this film has a cyclical rhythm. It repeats and expands upon or changes its visual imagery as the narrator repeats her story. Couzin creates a sinister, absurd world with rare human contacts. She intercuts her own footage with found material dating from the early sixties. In these, West German newsreel-type sequences, she contrasts an East German display of military hardware with a race run by formally dressed waiters carrying trays full of drinks, creating an abrasive juxtaposition. She counters the building of the Berlin Wall with shots of workmen laying quite ordinary bricks. A boy, possibly the child talked about in the narrative, appears in color, jumping rope: he's in training to be a boxer, a soldier, a human guinea pig, perhaps a victim. Some of the footage is over twenty years old, suggesting the archaic quality of memory. The color scenes, in contrast, suggest a "normal" present, in which the narrator continues to function.

*DEUTSCHLAND SPIEGEL* is fiction, less clearly autobiographical than the other films, but equally concerned that the role and work of the filmmaker be identified ("But behind the projector ..."). The story may happen in Germany or anywhere, but the threat and unease pertain to our time and lives. The circular movements reinforce the theme of indoctrination; as movements become machine like, human forms become extensions of the factory. We see trays of dolls, toy cars as if on an assembly line, the boy performing repetitious activity for scientists. Sports references (fox hunt, waiters' tournament, boxing training) add an absurd dimension depicting human activity as a senseless manipulation of the body, and these references by images showing the pointless building of a stage set in the middle of the street.

Couzin's collage technique resembles Bruce Conner's in its distortion of found footage, turning ordinary events in ridiculous or sinister directions. The sense of dream hovers; the audience's perspective at any given time may be fragmented, as when the visuals and their connotations are re-interpreted by a narrator's descriptions of them. We experience a disjuncture between the images shown and the images described, a discomfiting lack of consistency. As in the New Novel, the veracity of the tale told and the relation of the tale to the teller become



questioned. Each variation of word and image alters our perspective on the whole, until the viewer begins to question the tale, the concept of memory, the act of storytelling, and her/his perception of events.

Furthermore, the repeated images refer to each other: automobile graveyards to lines of miniature cars: lines of toy cars to lines of manufactured dolls: lines of dolls to people endlessly waiting. Concentration camp overtones are reinforced by images of enclosure: fences, tarpaulins, narrow alleys, barbed wire, bricked-up windows. Over images of claustrophobia and manipulation, the narrator speaks of her childhood. Her early expectations were different from those of her brother as they learned adult gender roles and became indoctrinated by things as simple as toys and as complex as mass murder.

After the highly charged and implicitly horrifying material of DEUTSCHLAND SPIEGEL, Couzin's films SALVE (1981) returns to a romantic, contemplative mode similar to that of ROSEBLOOD. SALVE is an unsentimental meditation upon human mortality, the measurement of time, the passing of generations, and Couzin's constant theme — the reduction of girls' expectations as they grow up, and women's as they grow older. SALVE focuses on the initiation of one girl into the language, but not the mysteries, of patriarchal measurement — from the calculation of pi to the passage of lives into death. The child wanders through a cemetery, Chicago's Graceland, where Chicago's important and wealthy men are buried along with their mothers and wives. In one brief sequence, Couzin moves her camera past the elaborate monuments commemorating owners and managers to the anonymous markers commemorating ordinary women. The cemetery's well-kept elegance reveals society's attitudes toward death and men's dying vs. women's passing. While the girl walks between the green and gray rows of gravestones, carelessly running her fingers over the Gothic letters or playing games with rocks, her voice on the sound track tells us,

"Pythagoras was a mathematician ... my father is a mathematician ..."

That voice off reads complex texts about mathematical theory and practice — going back to the Greeks who thought that even numbers were female, odd ones male. All the while numbers themselves are spoken, repeated, written down -seemingly part of a mystery that the girl is not privy to. Her own epitaph — like that of the women in the graveyard — may indeed be no more than "Mother" or "Wife."

Once again Couzin emphasized a certain perspective on her subject by her personalized use of the fisheye lens and her close-up, dense, tactile exploration of objects: grave, stones, stairways, mausoleums, and windows. She contrasts the transience of childhood with images of human aspiration toward the eternal and immobile, which graves and buildings represent. She maintains a melancholy tone in SALVE by evocatively using classical music, rain imagery, and muted colors. She expresses traditional romantic notions of grief and loss to further emphasize the waste and lost potential in girl child's life.

Couzin's perspective is here at the far end of the romantic spectrum, which has as its opposite the late 19th Century patriarchal and acquisitive attitudes toward life and death which the builders of Graceland Cemetery sought to ennoble. In *SALVE*, *DEUTSCHLAND SPIEGEL*, and *A TROJAN HOUSE*, Couzin depicts such traditions as detrimental and destructive to women's creativity. Continuing in this vein, Couzin is now finishing *WHAT EVERY WOMAN KNOWS*, a film about the way women see themselves as opposed to the way society as a whole and men see them.

As Couzin is quick to point out, an audience for the kind of films she makes must be nurtured along and cultivated. Unfortunately, outside New York City, few communities provide this kind of commitment to non-traditional filmmaking. Museums neglect local people, particularly local independent filmmakers, preferring to address the known tastes of a traditionally-minded patronage.

Financial support is even harder to come by. Not only does Couzin teach in order to support herself and her family, but she also takes on occasional additional non-film work to finance special projects or new equipment. Despite this financial burden, however, she has by these means avoided any absolute ties to an educational institution for equipment or to a government grant for day-to-day living expenses. The gains, she's achieved however, do not outweigh her losses. Problems of financing and finding time to execute a project are legion, for any woman working in the experimental mode. Couzin, for example, has a full-time appointment at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She admits that although teaching has its rewards, it is still an emotionally draining and time-consuming enterprise which takes energy away from her own work.

Despite the potential drawbacks mentioned above, working with traditional romantic conventions offers distinct advantages, particularly for the woman filmmakers hoping to strike a responsive chord in other women. If they were raised in the romantic aesthetic, on *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* and the poetry of Dickinson, an audience of women not necessarily familiar with avant-garde filmmaking or interested in the technical gymnastics of the experimental mode will quite easily understand and appreciate a filmmaker's work which describes their lives in a recognizable, but fresh and challenging way.<sup>(5)</sup> It is important that Sharon Couzin speaks to the often obscured, neglected or unexpressed viewpoint of socially alienated woman viewers, who may be an avant-garde audience in the making.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Hugh Honour, *Romanticism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), p. 210.

<sup>2</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979) p. 319.

[3.](#) P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

[4.](#) See Thomas B. Hess and Elizabeth C. Bader, eds., *Art and Sexual Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1973); and Lucy L. Lippard, *From the Center* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976).

[5.](#) A discussion of the pros and cons of Romantic aesthetics in feminist filmmaking has been raised in terms of the films of Barbara Hammer. See "Counter-Currencies of a Lesbian Iconography" by Jacquelyn Zita and "Lesbian Cinema and Romantic Love" by Andrea Weiss in JUMP CUT, 24/25 (March 1981).

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## New U.S. Black Cinema

by Clyde Taylor

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The best approach to black cinema as art is to see it in intimate relation to the full range of Afro-American art expression. The urgent need at this point is to recognize that black cinema has arrived to take its natural place beside black music, literature, dance, and drama. By black cinema, I am speaking of the independent films made since the late sixties by determined, university-trained filmmakers who owe Hollywood nothing at all.

If the Harlem Renaissance or, better yet, the New Negro Movement that began in the 1920s were to take place under today's conditions, many of its major creative talents would be filmmakers. They would celebrate and join a contemporary black renaissance in films. Consider: Paul Robeson's struggle to bring dignity to the Afro-American screen image is well documented. Richard Wright's interest in films extended beyond the filming of *NATIVE SON* (1951) to include his search for work as a screenwriter for the National Film Board of Canada and the drafting of unused film scripts. Langston Hughes coauthored the script for *WAY DOWN SOUTH* (1939) with Clarence Muse and continually sought creative opportunities in Hollywood. In 1941, he wrote with great clarity to his friend Ama Bontemps,

"Have been having some conferences with movie producers, but no results. I think only a subsidized Negro Film Institute, or the revolution, will cause any really good Negro pictures to be made in America."[\(1\)](#)

In 1950, Ama Bontemps tried to stir up interest in the production of black films in the manner of Italian neorealism.[\(2\)](#) About this same time, the Committee for Mass Education in Race Relations was set up with the intent to "produce films that combine entertainment and purposeful mass education in race relations." Among the consultants and members of this committee were Katherine Dunham, Paul Robeson, Richard Wright, Eslanda Robeson, Langston Hughes<sup>1</sup>, and Countee Cullen.[\(3\)](#)

I pinpoint the film involvement of some of the central artist-intellectuals of the New Negro era in order to contrast the lack, with some important exceptions, of a comparable interest among their successors. This short-sightedness is both ironic and painful. Over the last decade, a body of Afro-American films has emerged comparable to the flowering of the "Harlem Renaissance" in their cultural independence, originality, and boldness — their appearance marking perhaps the most significant recent development in Afro-American art.

This body of films, which I call the new black cinema, is distinct from four prior episodes of filmmaking about Afro-Americans: Hollywood films portraying blacks before WW1, Hollywood films after that war, films made by black independents like Oscar Micheaux and Spencer Williams before WW2, and the black exploitation movies of the late sixties and early seventies. What separates the new black cinema from these other episodes is its freedom from the mental colonization that Hollywood tries to impose on all its audiences, black and white.

The new black cinema was born out of the black arts movement of the 1960s, out of the same concerns with a self-determining black cultural identity. This film phenomenon drew inspiration from black-subject films made by white directors in the 1960s such as *NOTHING BUT A MAN* (1964), *COOL WORLD* (1963), *SHADOWS* (1959), and *SWEET LOVE, BITTER* (1967). It was also fired by the creative heresies of Italian neorealism (following Ama Bontemps's early interest) and ultimately by an expanding international film culture, with a particularly deep impression being scored by African and other Third World filmmakers.

The new black cinema is a movement with many separate beginnings in the late sixties. One was the gathering of a nucleus of young black filmmakers at "Black Journal," a weekly television magazine aired on PBS under the leadership of Bill Greaves in New York. Another was the tragically brief career of Richie Mason, who, without training, took cameras into the streets of New York to make dramatic street films (*GHETTO; YOU DIG IT?*). Still another was a path-breaking exhibition of historical and contemporary independent black films in New York organized by Pearl Bowser. By the time films of great innovation and energy began emerging from UCLA in the early seventies from Haile Gerima, Larry Clark, and Charles Burnett, it was clear that a new path had been broken toward a liberated black screen image.

What gives this new cinema its particular unifying character? In truth, little more than its determined resistance to the film ideology of Hollywood — but that, as we shall see, is a great deal. Under that broad umbrella of kinship, these filmmakers have produced work of considerable diversity, pursuing various goals of aesthetic individualism, cultural integrity, or political relevance. Despite this diversity, some core features or defining aesthetic principles can be seen to underlie many works of the new black cinema in three directions: its realness dimension, its relation to Afro-American oral tradition, and its

connections with black music.

## THE REALNESS DIMENSION

Indigenous Afro-American films project onto a social space, as UCLA film scholar Teshome Gabriel observes, noting the difference between it and the privatistic, individualistic space of Hollywood's film theater. It is a space carrying a commitment, in echoes and connotations, to the particular social experience of Afro-American people. It establishes only the slightest, if any, departure from the contiguous, offscreen reality.

While shooting *BUSH MAMA* (Haile Gerima, 1976), for instance, one camera crew was accosted by the Los Angeles police. What was there in the sight of black men with motion picture cameras filming in the streets of south-central Los Angeles (Watts) that prompted the police to pull their guns, spread-eagle these filmmakers against cars, and frisk them? Did they mistake the cameras for weapons — did they sense a robbery in progress, a misappropriation of evidence? Did they suspect the cameras were stolen, being in the inappropriate hands of the intended victims of cinema?

The paranoia of such questions belongs to the mentality of the Los Angeles Police Department. The evidence of their actions is recorded objectively in cinema verite as the establishing shots of the film. These shots make a fitting prologue because *BUSH MAMA* is about the policing of the black community by school officials, in and out of uniform, who intrude their behavioral directives into the most intimate reaches of its residents. From such a documentary beginning, one is more easily convinced that the daily actions of its inhabitants are constantly policed, in the sense that all actions are regarded with hostility and suspicion except those that reproduce the cycles of victimization and self-repression.

The social space of many new black films is saturated with contingency. Simply, it is the contingency of on-location shooting. But what a location. It is a space in which invasion is immanent. A street scene in these films is a place where anything can happen, any bizarre or brutal picaresque eventuality, as in *A PLACE IN TIME* (Charles Lane, 1976). An interior location attracts the feeling of prison, or refuge. A door is a venue through which an intruder may suddenly burst, either police or madman. The folklore surrounding this school of adventuresome filmmaking is replete with art/life ironies: a film about a black man trying to live his life without going to jail is interrupted when the actor interpreting the role is put in jail for nonsupport.

The intensities of such dilemmas, sometimes the events themselves, become interwoven into the text of the film. Everyone knows that the anthropologist with a camera alters the reality he/she records. Similarly, "reality" arranges itself differently in the United States for an independent black filmmaker. Nor does this filmmaker always maintain a cool detachment in the face of these rearrangements. The hot rage that suffuses *SWEET SWEETBACK'S BAAADASS SONG* (Melvin Von

Peebles, 1971) is one clue that the film itself is allegorical of the furious ordeal of a black person trying to make a mentally independent film against the resistances that the society will mount in reaction. By Larry Clark's testimony, the sharp-edged racial portrayals in *PASSING THROUGH* (1977) reflect his frustrations in getting his film completed against such resistances.

So the space occupied by an independent black film is frequently tempered by the values of social paranoia, volatility, and contingency, and by a more knowing acquaintance with these values than the stable tranquility and predictable unpredictability of an U.S. movie set, even when that set is background for a commercial black movie.

The screen and theatrical space of the new black cinema is one the spectator can enter and exit without carrying away the glazed eyes and the afterglow of erotic-egotistic enchantment that identifies the colonized moviegoer. In it, both filmmakers and spectators can move easily and interchangeably before and behind the camera without drastic alterations of character. This is a rare circumstance for Afro-Americans, for as Walter Benjamin notes of another cinema,

"Some of the players whom we meet in Russian films are not actors in our sense but people who portray themselves — and primarily in their own work process. In Western Europe the capitalistic exploitation of the film denies consideration to modern man's legitimate claim to being reproduced." [\(4\)](#)

It is a space open to wide-ranging possibilities, yet free of the illusionism whose effects make mainstream commercial films so superficially enchanting. To take one convention of the Hollywood cinematic code for example, consider the double pyramid that describes the individualistic perspective. One of these imaginary pyramids extends from the four corners of the screen towards a vanishing point within the scene, reproductive of the depth perception of Renaissance painting. The other perspectival pyramid extends from these same points, converging on the eye-screen of the single observer. Such a perspective has great potential for focusing attention at hierarchically staged points of meaning. These seem to the individual observer to be channeled directly to his mind-screen, a chamber of privileged voyeurism.

The camera of the new black cinema is not similarly obsessed. The focus of its attention is wider, more open to diverse, competing, even accidental impressions. The basic palette of the indigenous Afro screen is closer to that of Italian neorealism and Third World cinema than to Southern California. Charlie Burnett, in *KILLER OF SHEEP* (1977), for instance, makes effective use of the open frame, in which characters walk in and out of the frame from top, bottom, and sides. It's a forbidden practice in the classical code of Hollywood (but common in European and Japanese films that he saw as a UCLA student). One further encounters fewer close-ups, suggesting less preoccupation with the interior emotions of individual personages.

The techniques of the new directors do not exclude inventive camera movements and placements, but these are dictated more often by the need of social reflection than the demands of individual fascination. The treatment of space generally reminds us that linear perspective was an invention and once the exclusive preoccupation of post-medieval Western art. By contrast, in Afro cinema one often finds the nonlinear, psychic space of medieval paintings, oriental scrolls, and other non-Western media. In *CHILD OF RESISTANCE* (1972), to take another example from the prolific Haile Gerima, the camera follows the central figure, a woman dressed in a robe, hands bound, being transported through a barroom into a jail cell, directly outside of which later appears a jury box filled with jurors. Linearity is rejected as space is treated poetically, following the coordinates of a propulsive social idea — the social imprisonment of black women.

The goals of the new cinema frequently cause it to invade territory familiar to documentary films, though this is an observation that may be misleading. What is shared with documentary is reality orientation. This reality dimension is present even in Afro films of the most intensively dramatic or fantastic content, of which there are several examples, and even in scenes of exquisite visual beauty.

Despite this shared orientation, the term “docudrama” is too loosely employed in discussion of Afro films. Two recent films by Woodie King, for instance, *THE TORTURE OF MOTHERS* (1980) and *DEATH OF A PROPHET* (1981), deal with events of recent history, the police frame-up of several black youths in New York in 1964, and the last day in the life of Malcolm X. They aim to be accurate to the historical record and they use actors and nonactors, but their intent is far more to dramatize than document.

Techniques associated with non-fictional cinema appear frequently in indigenous Afro films. One of the most piercing scenes in Ben Caldwell's poetic and literary *I AND I* (1978) is staged as a documentary interview. Similarly, the dramatic action of *TORTURE OF MOTHERS* is launched from the setting of a group pooling testimony before a tape recorder. An off-camera voicetrack supplants dialogue in *CHILD OF RESISTANCE*. And Larry Clark, in making *PASSING THROUGH*, goes beyond the typical use of archival footage as historical flashback by inventing a documentary-looking sequence that places his hero, Womack, in the midst of the eruption at Attica.

In effect, the responsibility to social reality that presides over the space of the new black cinema has led to a number of films that not only arise out of a “documentary” setting but continue to unfold in a world articulated by the techniques and strategies of non-fictional cinema, as in Italian neorealism, but with an Afro sensibility.

Another support of the realness dimension in Afro cinema is its use of cultural-historical time. The cultural identity of the people in these films may be expressed as that of a people with a certain history. Dramatic time is never wholly divorced from historic time. What time is it is a



question that is inseparable from the texture of the scene.

Both black and white independent filmmakers sometimes forsake explicit cultural and historical reference but usually for different reasons. It has been said of the affecting documentary, *THE QUIET ONE* (1948), made by Sidney Meyers, that "the boy's blackness was not given any special significance."<sup>(5)</sup> And *NOTHING BUT A MAN* (1964), directed by Michael Roemer, omitted reference to the civil rights movement taking place at the time and place of the film's action. In these respects, the themes of these two films, both respected by black cineastes, would probably have received different treatment by indigenous filmmakers. For example, when Haile Gerima downplays the particulars of the legal case in *WILMINGTON 10, USA TEN THOUSAND* (1978), it is to subsume that travesty within a broader historical framework, that of the continuous struggle of Afro-Americans for liberation, in which ten thousand have been victimized in the manner dealt to the Wilmington freedom fighters.<sup>(6)</sup>

Even where concrete historical reference is absent, where the action is set in an unspecified present tense, the idea of who black people are historically is implicitly reflected in every communicative action and reflected most consistently with the self-understanding of the cultural group portrayed. This is true despite variations in the sense of history among individual filmmakers.

In Hollywood portrayals of blacks, there is also a historical dimension. But this sense of history is "vaudevillainous" — the play history of musical comedy, costume spectaculars, and sentimentalized biographies. It is not noted often enough that the liberties taken with history for the sake of a more entertaining story in this vaudevillainous cinema have an important connection with ethnic distortions. For when a people are distorted on screen, their history, their collective cultural memory, is disfigured at the same moment.

The subtly implanted sense of who these people are and where they are coming from is thus a major source of the greater internal authority of the new black cinema. This is a cinema in which Afro-Americans are both the subject and the object of consideration. And the relations of those considerations are least tempered with by extraneous manipulations.

## ORAL TRADITION

In one of the most rudimentary film situations, the "talking head" sequence of nonfiction film, lies a key to another source of the character of indigenous Afro films. When our attention is riveted by the information given by the speaker, as in television newscasts, we may think of the speaker as an interviewee. When this attention is split between the information imparted and the personality of the speaker, the manner of speech, the cultural resonance of the words and images, the social and cultural connotations, the art of the message spoken, when, in short, speech takes on the character of *performance*, we may

likely think of the speaker as an oral historian.

One finds oral historians in all segments of U.S. cinema, from the Appalachian coal miners of HARLAN COUNTRY, USA to the interviews inserted in REDS. But the Afro speaker in films is more likely to speak as an oral historian, if only because of inadequate assimilation of the bourgeois broadcast orientation that leaves one voice interchangeable with another. The significant contrast is between the Afro-American oral tradition, easily the most vital vernacular tradition surviving in America, and the linearized speech dominated by Western literacy. In Afro oral tradition, filmmakers of the new black cinema find one of their most invaluable resources.

Because it brashly transgresses the barriers of standardized communication, Afro oral tradition is also a magnet for those inclined to vaudevillize, minstrelize, or sensationalize it. COTTON COMES TO HARLEM (1970) is typical of the exploitative use of black speech with its gratuitous vaudeville jokes that harken back to the slack-mouthed asides of Willie Best. The humor of PUTNEY SWOPE (1969) relies mainly on a leering treatment of black hip speech and profanity. And the supposedly left-radical documentary slide show, AMERICAN PICTURES, miserably distorts and dehumanizes its black (and white) informants by framing them within its condescending, self-indulgent liberalism.

But the real thing is abundantly available in documentaries and ethnographic films made by black and white filmmakers about the Afro oral tradition or its related expressions — in films such as NO MAPS ON MY TAPS (1980) (tap dancing), AMERICAN SHOESHINE (1976), EPHEMUS (1965), and LET THE CHURCH SAY AMEN (1972) (folk preaching), THE FACTS OF LIFE (1981) (blues), and THE DAY THE ANIMALS TALKED (1981) (folktales), both by Carol Lawrence and the southern folklore films of William Ferris and particularly in jazz films like BUT THEN SHE'S BETTY CARTER (1981), MINGUS (1966), and THE LAST OF THE BLUE DEVILS (1980). In such films one might find a saturation of black values and therefore an edge toward the definition of black identity in films after Stephen Henderson's approach to black poetry.[\(7\)](#)

Contrasting postures toward the representation of Afro oral history are seen in two carefully positioned nonfiction films, Warrington Huahn's STREET CORNER STORIES (1978) and Haile Gerima's WILMINGTON 10, USA TEN THOUSAND. The orientation of STREET CORNER STORIES is observational. Hudlin used cinema-verite techniques, exposing his films in and around a New Haven corner store where black men congregate before going to work, catching their practice of black storytelling and uninhibited rapping, not entirely unobserved, as their occasional straining for effects reveals. The orientation of WILMINGTON 10 is committed. This is nowhere more apparent than in the powerful, impassioned speeches of the women who dominate its text, the wives and mothers of some of the Wilmington defendants who recount chapter and verse of liberation struggles past and present

together with their uncensored opinions, directly into the camera.

It is not simply the case of one approach being more political than the other, for both are necessarily ideological and reflective of the ideological diversity and oppositions within the indigenous Afro film movement. Nor is it narrowly a question of technique. Neither film, for instance, uses a voice-of-God narration. Finally, as is usual with nonfiction cinema, it is a question of selectivity. *STREET CORNER STORIES* derives its Afro oral energies from the witty irreverence of black cracker-barrel humor, its rimes and jibes merely transposed from the porch of the country store to the city. *WILMINGTON 10* is much like an updated escaped-slave narrative, with all of the intense political sermonizing familiar to that genre. Both films are valid, essentially successful deployments of black verbal creativity in different occasional modes.

Yet what they have to tell us about the ideological tendencies they reflect is communicated by the hazards of their respective orientations. Hudlin's film was intended as a response to the superficial sociology of works like Elliot Liebow's book *Talley's Corner*, where black streetmen are portrayed as defeated moral opportunists, sexual chauvinists, and exploiters and compensatory dreamers. Yet Hudlin's own portrait reflects communal self-hatred without interpreting its source in an oppressive society. One cannot contest the reportorial accuracy of his portrayal nor the achievement in his film of a look of unmanipulated realness. Still Hudlin's streetmen impress one much like those on Talley's corner. *STREET CORNER STORIES* does not overcome the danger of distortion arising from "objectivity" without explanation or the danger of distorting Afro oral tradition by exploiting it voyeuristically while presenting it as pure anthropology.

As black oral history, many of the scenes in *WILMINGTON 10* are unsurpassed in the projection of strong, committed black speech and personality, offered straight from the soul with earthy articulateness. The folk songs and prison blues of its sound track are hauntingly supportive of the film's eloquence. Yet the film is excessively rhetorical, specifically in its last sequences where unidentified black activists of no clear connection with the Wilmington struggle make political speeches while sitting in abstract isolation on pedestals. Their inclusion is gratuitous, an inorganic coda to the Wilmington scene, from which the earlier speakers drew their spontaneous vitality. Ironically, the ideological tendencies of both films are pushed towards enervation by their urging too much of one kind of text without sufficient, balancing context.

In Afro-American "orature" one can generally find many distinctive and richly expressive characteristics, including a tolerance for semantic ambiguity, a fascination with bold, extravagant metaphor, a "cool" sensibility, a funky explicitness, and a frequently prophetic mode of utterance. The centrality of this tradition to the new black cinema is only understood when we realize its presence in the speech and

"performance" of the participants in nonfiction films. In addition, the tradition is also visible within the total configuration of both nonfiction and dramatic works, in characterization, camera strategies, principles of montage, tempo, narrative structure, and so forth. One can even find its features in Charles Lane's wittily silent tragi-comedy, *A PLACE IN TIME*. As in Afro orature, narrative structure in the new films is often more episodic and non-sequential than the well-made plot dear to Western popular drama and more concerned with tonal placement and emphasis. In its search for its own voice, for a film language uncompromised by the ubiquitous precedents of the dominant cinema, the new black cinema is making productive explorations into the still undominated speech of black people.

## THE INFLUENCE OF BLACK MUSIC

To turn from black oral tradition to black music is really not to turn at all but only to allow one's attention to glide from the words to the melody of a people's indivisible cultural expression. But what has been said about the influence of oral tradition has been inferential. The impact of black music on the new black cinema is clearly intentional and well documented. Of about twenty black filmmakers I have interviewed recently, roughly three-fourths of them stressed black music as a formative and fundamental reference for their art.

The involvement with black music probes deeper than laying a rhythmic sound track beneath images of black people (tom-toms for the rising redemptive energies of the collective), though the musical sound track is a good place to begin.

Western music will menace a non-Western film with cultural compromise. Not intrinsically, not inevitably. Charles Lane, for one, uses "classical" music effectively in his silent farce, *A PLACE IN TIME*, with no loss to its Afro character. But who can have escaped the subsidized imposition of European superiority as communicated by its musical "classics" which are hawked and hustled everywhere. They underwrite, for instance, the insistent Europeaness of so many, say, French new wave films with their Bached and Mozartized scores or not noticed the introduction of nonclassical music for comic or pastoral diversion? For the new black filmmaker, the technical invention and development of the art of cinema in the West poses a burden and challenge to his/her creative independence that is lifted once he or she turns to the question of music. Being artists, living under cultural domination, they will be privy to the open secret that the definitive musical sound of the twentieth century originates from their people.

What is more revealing is the way music is used. Ousmane Sembene, Africa's most independent film innovator, accurately observes that

“the whites have music for everything in their films — music for rain, music for the wind, music for tears, music for moments of emotion, but they don't know how to make these elements speak for themselves.”[\(8\)](#)

But, recognizing in their music an invaluable precedent of cultural liberation, Afro filmmakers have not pursued, with Sembene, a "cinema of silence." (Although Woodie King effectively omits music from *THE TORTURE OF MOTHERS*, a taut reliving of a series of brutal racist incidents.)

Instead, their use of music in films is less sentimental and less literary than conventional Western practice. To get to the core of the difference, we should recall Richard Wright's contrast between the false sentiment of tin pan alley songs and lyrics, with their twittering about moon-croon-June, and the more adult, realistic directness of the blues. Mass film entertainment in the United States has never outgrown the musical shadow work of the silent film era where piano or organ sententiously telegraphed the appropriate emotion to the viewer regarding the character, place, and event on the screen. Such a use of music channeled the viewer's aural responses toward a self-pitying individualism, much as the visual cinematic code cultivates egocentric perspective.

In Afro film, music relates to screen action more like the relation of guitar accompaniment to sung blues, broadening the primary narrative statement with commentary that sometimes modulates its directness but just as frequently establishes an ironic, parallel, or distancing realism. When used as sympathetic accompaniment, the music in Afro cinema frequently shares connotations with its audience of collective, cultural-historic significance, in contrast to the music of bourgeois, commercial egoism. Though subject to abuse, the motif of tom-tom signifying communal resurgence nevertheless illustrates this less privatistic musical intention.

The deeper possibilities of black music for furnishing a creative paradigm for Afro cinema have been advanced in Warrington Hudlin's film concept of "blues realism," a defining attitude and style of life.

"It seems to me that if black films are to continue to be called black films, they will have to develop an aesthetic character that will distinguish them in the same way that Japanese films, Italian neo-realist films, or even the French new wave films are distinct. I think the blues provides an aesthetic base and direction. At the risk of sounding pretentious, I feel my efforts in *STREET CORNER STORIES* and the achievement of Robert Gardner in his exceptional short film *I COULD HEAR YOU ALL THE WAY DOWN THE HALL* (1976) are the beginnings of a new school of filmmaking, a new wave, if you will."[\(9\)](#)

In retrospect, Hudlin's formulation of blues realism betrays the adventitiousness of artistic theory developed in the course of resolving particular aesthetic problems, then promoted too broadly as a vehicle of self-definition. Blues realism relied too narrowly on the blues concept of novelist Ralph Ellison and was applied too strictly to too few films. Perhaps recognizing this, Hudlin has since distanced himself from the

concept, partly, I think, because his subsequent films, *CAPOERIA* (1980) and *COLOR* (video, 1982), have moved away from the cinema verite technique of *STREET CORNER STORIES* that he associated with blues realism and partly because, at the time of its formulation, he had not seen several Afro films, particularly West Coast films, that might have modified or challenged his definitions.

Blues realism as articulated by Hudlin needs to be respected, nevertheless, as a premature sally onto sound grounds. We do not need to discard it, but to amplify and extend it to many different blues sensibilities and many different registers of black musical sensibility which help us realize an understanding of Afro films in their variety. *STREET CORNER STORIES*, for instance, captures the tonal reference of an amoral, all-male blues world moving from country to city on a trajectory roughly parallel to the course from *Lightin' Hopkins* to *Jimmie Witherspoon*. Alternatively, *WILMINGTON 10*, as already noted, vibrates most completely to the blues of the southern prison farm. It also realizes on the screen the equivalent of its sound-track employment of the woman-supportive, country/folk singing of "Sweet Honey in the Rock." One must understand music in Afro-American culture as a constituent element of thought, perception, and communication.<sup>(10)</sup> Many of the new filmmakers attempt to transpose the tonal/ structural register and cognitive framework of several varieties of black music. The works of others seem attached to specific black musical worlds by virtue of their having tapped dimensions of black experience congruent with certain musical precedents. Hugh Hill's *LIGHT OPERA* (1975) offers an example from the "pure" end of the visual music spectrum with his exposures and editing of light and images in New York's Times Square, orchestrated nonnarratively to the music of Ornette Coleman and to the more abstract explorations of New Jazz. The fictive-emotional world of Bill Gunn's *GANJA AND HESS* (1973) is embedded in the resonances of a literary, self-conscious form of gospel music. The visual imagery of Barbara McCullough's experimental *WATER RITUAL #1* (1979) emerges out of a funky New Jazz, saturated in African cosmology.

Ben Caldwell's *I AND I*, another film deeply implicated in black music, is best understood as a meditation in blues mode on identities of Africa in America. Its title further notes a debt to reggae-Rastafarian consciousness. Framed by the passage of a spirit-woman protagonist from Africa through experiences and revelations in America, its structure rests principally on three "stanzas" or "choruses." First, the protagonist becomes a black man mourning/ cursing his confined white father. Next, she witnesses the oral narration of an old black woman, recounting the lynching and murder of her grandfather. Finally, she metamorphoses into a contemporary black woman, imparting a cosmological heritage to her son.

The distinct contribution of *I AND I* to the repertory of music-based black cinema is its impact on improvisation. Still photos of urban and rural black life are interspersed among explicitly funky dramatic



vignettes and lyrical-prophetic stagings in an order hovering between narrative closure and abstract association. One idea or image gives birth to another in the manner of an instrumental jazz soloist's far-flung, highly colored variations on a traditional blues theme. The semantics of this film are akin to those of the instrumental jazz theater, in which the performer calls the audience together to celebrate shared passages of life through his/her voicing of a familiar tune. In *I AND I*, blues realism is extended to blues prophetism in a register my ears would place close to the spiritualized, Africanized blues of John Coltrane or Coltrane-Ellington.

The idea of black film as music is also given wide syntactical exploration in Larry Clark's dramatic feature, *PASSING THROUGH*. Here, the dramatic theme is black music, the struggle of musicians against the exploitations of gangster entrepreneurs. More subtly fulfilled than its story is its visual exposition through musical montage. Each sequence is introduced or segmented by music. Musical cues dominate its architecture. Typically, in the middle of a tenor saxophone solo played by the protagonist, Womack, the camera closes in on the bell of the horn, which becomes an iris perspective, framing the documentary flashbacks mentioned earlier, the dogs of Birmingham, black nationalist/police shootout in Cleveland, Attica. Clark's montage suggests visual references for the solo's nonverbal expression, offering a visual exegesis of the way improvised jazz solos reflect individual and group experience.

*I AND I* and *PASSING THROUGH*, together with the briefer explorations of Barbara McCullough and Hugh Hill, offer the widest, most far-reaching illustrations of the integral relation of black music and film. In these works, we recognize the representative palette of the new black filmmaker as a keyboard. The greater dimension of performance in the identity of the African and Afro-American artist also extends to the new black filmmakers. We should visualize them as shaping their compositions by selectively playing, with more or less emphasis, the available elements of documentary realism, the several modes of Afro oral tradition, musical structure and coloration, and dramatic intention.

Two useful perspectives can be gained by viewing the new black cinema as a creative "renaissance." Some fruitful bearings can be found in considering the recent film movement alongside the Harlem Renaissance, the best-known art movement launched by black Americans. One is then further drawn to the fundamental relatedness between this body of films and other forms of black art.

The independent films of Afro-Americans since the late 1960s, it should be clear by now, have made a departure from all prior examples of black imagery sharp enough to be considered a distinct aesthetic phenomenon. History has not favored the new film movement with a reverberating social and artistic era in which it might achieve its full resonance. Many Afro-Americans have lamented the virtual adoption as

pets that happened to the writers of the twenties by white patrons and faddists, yet ironically they remain mute when an indigenous film movement emerges without benefit of such dubious blessings.

Without the buoyancy of a vogue or the nostalgia of an era consecrated in popular mythology, the new black cinema has managed a transformation of imaginative possibilities comparable in scope, diversity, and creative verve to the literary twenties. Over the last decade, Afro independents have produced over two hundred films of varied length, including a score of dramatic features and an equal number of documentary features — an output rivaling the literary output of the Harlem Renaissance.

The singular accomplishment of the literary awakening of the 1920s was to establish an Afro-American voice for literary art, the recreation of a cultural identity in literary form, more solidly in poetry than prose, and principally through the reappropriation of Afro vernacular in speech and music. The writers of that period advanced a fertile decolonization from Western aesthetic norms. Almost without notice, the contemporary filmmakers have gone further toward decolonization of a more blatantly colonized medium. They have not only planted a new body of Afro-American art, they have done this while freeing that art of colonial imitation, apology, or deference. And while the observations made here fall far short of exhausting the characteristics that give these films their cultural identity, they might point the way to the realization that the new cinema, unlike any other, is a representative expression of Afro-American life.

## Notes

[1.](#) *Arna Bontemps — Langston Hughes Letters, 1925-1967*, ed. Charles H. Nichols (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1980), p. 89.

[2.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 273.

[3.](#) From a brochure in the files of the Schomburg Library, New York City.

[4.](#) Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), p. 232.

[5.](#) Lewis Jacobs, *The Documentary Tradition* (New York: Norton, 1979), p. 187.

[6.](#) The Wilmington ten were defendants in a celebrated case of official misjustice. The ten North Carolina political activists were charged with firebombing a grocery store during a time of racial tension in 1971. They were convicted on the basis of pressured testimony, later recanted by some of the supposed witnesses. They were given unusually harsh sentences. At the time of the film, all but the Reverend Ben Chavis had been released. Chavis himself is now free.



[7.](#) *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (New York, 1973). By saturation, Henderson means a density of reference and tone by which the observer can recognize the cultural Afro-ness of a work, even in the absence of explicit verbal clues. Henderson finds saturation, for instance, in Aretha Franklin's "Spirits in the Dark."

[8.](#) "Film-makers Have a Great Responsibility to Our People: An Interview with Ousmane Sembene," *Cineaste* 6, no. 1, p. 29.

[9.](#) "Interview: Warrington Hudlin," by Oliver Franklin, program brochure for Black Films and Film Makers, Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum, Philadelphia, PA.

[10.](#) See Clyde Taylor, "Salt Peanuts: Sound and Sense in African/American Oral/ Musical Creativity," *Calaloo*, June 1982.

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## Epic theater and counter cinema, part 2

by Alan Lovell

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This is the second part of an essay on Brecht and Counter-Cinema by Alan Lovell. The first part appeared in JUMP CUT, No. 27 (1982).

Godard's later films have been considered primary examples of "open text" strategies. This strategy is committed to displacing any one level (discourse) in the art work that claims to subordinate the other levels (discourses). A central concern for the creators of "open texts" has been to remove the narrator from the traditional position of dominance. It became easy to merge the open text strategy with Epic theatre. Both strategies distance the audience and encourage it to be critical of what it witnesses.

Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin's *WIND FROM THE EAST* represents an emblematic film for the open text strategy. Its sound track uses a number of voices. A few of these (the first and second female voices, the male voice) emerge as substantial ones, which state different political positions. Their clash seems an invitation to the spectator to join in and work out his/her own position.

What is the nature of the film's political discussion? The film poses a variety of issues throughout. In fact, it touches almost all the themes of left politics in the late 1960s: critique of the consumer society, sexuality, violence as a form of political action, Third World cinema, the entrenched and conservative quality of the trade unions and communist parties, the threat of revisionism, the ideological power of the bourgeoisie through their control over sign systems, and anti-Americanism.

Since no film the length of *WIND FROM THE EAST* can deal adequately with such a large variety of issues, the level of discussion throughout the film necessarily remains superficial and generally reduces these political issues to a parade of commonplaces. Thus we hear,

Second Female Voice: "The class which disposes of the material means of production also disposes of the intellectual means of production. Thus the ideas of those people who are deprived of the intellectual means of production can be said to be repressed by the ruling class."

This difficulty is compounded by the film's organization. On the face of it, the film seems to have an orderly, rational organization, marked by division into sections, each of which is described by a specific title: "The Strike," "The Delegate," "The Active Minorities," "The General Assembly," etc.. Increasingly through the film, the content of a section bears only a tangential relationship to its title. Matters become introduced that have no relationship to that title. The section headed "The Active Minorities," for example, focuses not on active minorities but on a number of politically objectionable people. Some of the people are real, some invented. Some of the actions they are accused of occurred, some didn't. The orderly, rational framework is a deception, masking the film's movement in terms of leaps, displacements, and changes in direction. It's surely a basic demand of the open text strategy, in that it offers the audience substantial positions to engage with.

However, I find a stronger reason for rejecting WIND FROM THE EAST as a successful "open text." The number of voices, the speed with which they speak, and the range of issues touched on make it difficult to follow any given argument. On a first viewing, a spectator with some political knowledge could sense only that at some level a position is being asserted. Further viewings, particularly if they're backed by reference to the script, would reveal that position fairly clearly and make it possible to locate where it was expressed in the film.

The film takes a radical left position, one with a Maoist coloring. It posits as overall enemies the bourgeoisie and Communist Party revisionism. A prime target is trade unions. The film sees as politically positive theoretical reflection and violence. The Second Female Voice expresses these ideas and dominates the sound track as the film progresses. It even dominates the end of the film. It remains an unchallenged voice, one of the characteristic positions of authority and closure. And the final title concludes as cheerfully as any socialist realist film.

If WIND FROM THE EAST does not provide a good example of an open text film, how does it relate to Epic theatre? First, the fiction in WIND FROM THE EAST doesn't have the substantial status it has in Brecht's plays. There is a fiction of sorts, which seems to be an Italian western, but that fiction has an attenuated, undeveloped quality. This difference is crucial. In Epic theatre the fictions provide the matter for reflection. In Godard's film, the fiction doesn't provide much substantial matter for reflection, not as much as Brecht's story of the communist agitators in THE MEASURE TAKEN or the astronomer's life in GALILEO do.

It has been argued that WIND FROM THE EAST is organized differently from Brecht's plays, that it is an essay rather than a story, that the

audience is encouraged to reflect directly on ideas rather than indirectly on them through the mediation of a story and characters. But this raises again the question of the film's lack of intellectual coherence and substance.

The way titles and other forms intervene into the fiction provides another point of comparison between Godard and Brecht's strategies. Brecht's methods are relatively conservative. Principally Brecht's interventions take the form of titles which have consistent functions, like locating the time and place of the action or indicating and commenting on how it will develop. Such interventions occur at traditional breaks in the drama, between scenes and acts, for example, and provide moments of rest and distance from the fiction.

Godard's interventions are more varied. As well as titles, he uses forms like black spacing, scratched film, and solid red frames. Godard uses such interventions quite unpredictably. Consequently, they work quite differently from Brecht's interventions. Even this is misleading, since they interrupt the fiction so frequently that *WIND FROM THE EAST* consists almost entirely of disruptions.

Godard and Gorin's distance from Brechtian methods is just as marked at other levels of the film. Where Brecht favors slow, relaxed rhythms, Godard favors fast, urgent ones. This is especially marked on the sound track, where words are spoken so rapidly that a minimal understanding of their meaning is difficult. At the level of color, where Brecht uses secondary, neutral colors (browns, grays), Godard uses primary, affective ones (reds, blues).

*WIND FROM THE EAST*'s basic strategy is diametrically opposed to that of Epic theatre. The film takes an aggressive approach to the audience. Through rapidity of movement at all levels of the film, disruption of traditional conventions (genre, story, character, camera movement, color), and an extravagant range of political and artistic references, the film assaults an audience, seeking to batter it into submission. Instead of distancing and openness, the film offers nearness and closure.

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Most of Godard's films (made often with Jean-Pierre Gorin) made in the late 1960's and early 1970s — *PRAVDA*, *VLADIMIR AND ROSA*, and *BRITISH SOUNDS* — are open to similar criticisms as *WIND FROM THE EAST*. *TOUT VA BIEN* provides an exception, and deserves separate- consideration for its relationship to Brecht's ideas.

More than any of the other films, *TOUT VA BIEN* has a substantial fiction. This is part of its attempt to establish a different relationship with the audience. The film has a less aggressive stance, is more relaxed, and almost genial in mood. The audience isn't assaulted and is allowed to maintain a certain distance from the film. The first half of *TOUT VA BIEN*, the description of the strike, uses broad comic conventions plus

songs and direct statement. It suggests the kind of popular, political drama that theatre artists like Erwin Piscator in Germany, Joan Littlewood in Britain, and Roger Planchon in France have worked for.

The second half establishes the film as basically operating in a traditional genre, critical social drama. A bourgeois couple is depicted. The film shows them put into a state of crisis which forces them to reconsider their relationship and their social situation. In situating the relationship socially, TOUT VA BIEN is within the genre, not outside it. The audience is implicitly invited to approve of the development of the characters. The characters' growth in self-criticism and self-awareness is undoubtedly offered in a positive way.

The interventions in TOUT VA BIEN can be seen as a way of undermining "the bourgeois couple in crisis" genre, but if they are, a difficulty arises. The fiction advocates positions that Godard wants his audience to approve of and which most of his sympathetic critics do approve of: support for strikes, criticism of the Communist Party and the unions, hostility to the consumer society, awareness of the relevance of sexuality to politics. If the fiction is undermined, are these positions undermined as well?

This interpretive difficulty arises because, like most of Godard's later films, TOUT VA BIEN comes as the product of contradictory impulses, a political one and a modernist art one. The political impulse leads towards realistic representation and/or direct statement. The modernist one leads towards a separation between art and reality, an emphasis on the conventional nature of art and the consequent freedom of the artist to manipulate/ displace these conventions. TOUT VA BIEN puts the weight on the first impulse: WIND FROM THE EAST puts it on the second. Neither avoids the contradiction.

Brecht and Godard also differ in the nature of the reflection they ask for from their audiences. Brecht asks for direct, empirical reflection, in line with his view that his plays model what the world is really like: "People needn't behave like this", or "Things don't have to be this way." Godard asks for theoretical reflection at a certain level of abstraction.

One of the issues TOUT VA BIEN provokes is its ability to generate theoretical reflection. Take the opening sequence, which shows the signing of checks for the people involved in the making of the film. The sequence establishes that large sums of money are paid to people who make films, and that stars are necessary. These are commonplaces, well known to anybody even mildly interested in the cinema. The significant question, however, deals with the relation between the film as economic product and the film as artistic product. This involves thinking about TOUT VA BIEN in terms of concepts like capitalism, base-superstructure relations, ideology. Yet a sequence which shows checks being signed will probably not provoke reflection in such conceptual terms, except by people who already use those concepts and have little need to be provoked into using them.

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Films like *WIND FROM THE EAST* and *TOUT VA BIEN* have been identified as the result of a political break in Godard's career away from the apolitical cinema of the New Wave with its enthusiasm for Hollywood movies towards a Marxist cinema constructed out of an opposition to Hollywood, a Counter Cinema. The problems Godard's later films raise can be better understood if his break is seen as much more qualified and politically ambiguous than critics usually acknowledge. To achieve this understanding, it's necessary to resituate Godard within the general cultural, political position of *Cahiers du Cinéma*.

In summary outline, *Cahiers'* position can be described as the attempt to join two antithetical positions: justify their positive enthusiasm for (1) Hollywood films, and for (2) the development of the cinema as a means of direct personal expression. The antithesis lies in the way the industrial, capitalist organization of Hollywood production creates maximum difficulties for individual expression.

*Cahiers* solved the critical problem by effectively ignoring the production system (yet, it was the nature of this system that André Bazin called attention to in his critique of the auteur theory) and by emphasizing the concept of individual genius (the auteur). How the auteur expressed him/herself was left mysterious. Not surprisingly, Andrew Sarris, the U.S. exponent of the auteur theory, talked about "an élan of the soul" in his attempt to account for cinematic auteurism. This amounts to a schizophrenic attitude to individual expression in filmmaking. It is dramatized by Godard in *LE MÉPRIS*, where Fritz Lang goes serenely on making his film of the *Odyssey* despite having an interfering producer (Jack Palance) in the worst Hollywood tradition.

If *Cahiers'* enthusiasm had centered on a cinema other than Hollywood, they would have faced a less intense problem, though very few cinemas are amenable to an individualist aesthetic (for example, U.S. avant-garde would offer a better choice than Hollywood). But the enthusiasm for Hollywood wasn't accidental. Rather, that choice of preferred object of criticism derived from a larger cultural configuration, the struggle of the European intelligentsia to come to terms with mass culture and with that society, the United States, which almost seemed to be defined by the existence of mass culture.

*Cahiers du Cinéma's* ideas reveal the strains and confusions produced by this configuration. French film criticism in the years immediately after the Second World War inherited a vital part of Surrealism's orientation to the cinema, a sympathetic interest in the mass entertainment film. *Cahiers* took over this interest but not its framework, one that derived from Freudianism and an anti-art stance. For the surrealist, the mass entertainment film, less inhibited by the controls of art, was more likely to reveal the workings of the unconscious — a trait highly valued by the surrealists.

In contrast, Freudianism established no strong presence in *Cahiers'* positions. A reverence for art is one of the most striking features of *Cahiers'* critical writing. Their discussion of all aspects of the cinema is full of references and allusions to traditional art. As part of their project was to establish the cinema on a par with the traditional arts. The auteur theory was *Cahiers'* principal critical method for dealing with Hollywood in this way. Like the traditional arts, Hollywood supposedly had great artists. Given the historical proximity of Surrealism, *Cahiers'* respect for art is surprising. What *Cahiers'* lacked, in contrast to Surrealism, was a critical politics, the kind which allowed the surrealists to identify traditional art as a powerful support of the established social order. *Cahiers'* critical writing was apolitical, veering towards an overt rightwing politics through an admiration for individualism and violence. Bazin's left-liberalism made an obvious exception and led to his giving the auteur theory only qualified support.

In his early days as a critic, before he became a New Wave film director, Godard provided a precise estimate of *Cahiers du Cinéma's* general project:

“We won the day in having it acknowledged in principle that a film by Hitchcock, for example, is as important as a book by Aragon. Film auteurs, thanks to us, have finally entered the history of art.” (*Godard on Godard*, ed. Tom Milne, London: Secker & Warburg, 1972, p.147)

Godard's own criticism fell completely within that project. He saw art as the direct expression of individuals, and the individualism as uncompromising:

“The cinema ... is an art. It does not mean teamwork. One is always alone; on the set as before the blank page.” (*Godard on Godard*, p. 76)

A film's interest and importance depends on its expressing culturally sanctified themes, primarily of a philosophical kind:

“How does one recognize Nicholas Ray's signature? Firstly by the compositions which can enclose an actor without stifling him and which somehow manage to make ideas as abstract as Liberty and Destiny both clear and tangible.” (*Godard on Godard*, p. 60)

Inside this basic position we see Godard's tendency to ask the kind of essentialist questions that have long stultified aesthetics like those in Bazin's *What Is Cinema?* And we see Godard's tendency to unquestioningly accept abstractions like "beauty." Politics is only fleetingly present in such criticism, though it's worth noting Godard's frequent references to Andre Malraux. Godard undoubtedly responds to Malraux's fascination with the intermingling of violence and art.

Even if *Cahiers'* general position had been a more interesting one,

Godard's development of it would have been compromised by the intellectual short-windedness and restlessness evident in his writing. He introduces a substantial idea, quickly drops it, and brings up another idea. He makes constant references over a wide area of cultural and intellectual activity in his youthful critical writings, but these references never rise above the level of decoration.

If, as the articulation of an intellectual position, Godard's early film criticism cannot be taken seriously, it does have other qualities. The restlessness, puns and allusions, and shifts from one idea to another combine to give Godard's writing an abstract energy. It consistently aims at effects of ingenuity, surprise and unpredictability. These writerly effects are sought often at the expense of the ideas being developed.

Even looked at in this way, Godard's writing cannot be validated as criticism. Whatever energy it generates, reading it remains a frustrating experience. Its vices — intellectual incoherence and lack of stamina — remain vices.

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His attempt to use cinema as a form of personal expression shaped Godard's early films up until *PIERROT LE FOU*. To construct films as substantial, crafted objects, using consequently large budgets and big crews, appeared to be the main block to personal expression. Now, instead, Godard conceived of his films as rough sketches which can be made cheaply with small crews.

The rough-sketch film, for Godard, derived from a cinema verite-influenced approach or at least exploited the same kind of cinematic effects as the practitioners of cinema verite. His approach incorporates the unsteadiness of the frame through a handheld camera; the sudden, jerky camera movement of a newsreel approach to staged action; the violent contrasts produced by the use of available light. Godard's editing accepts the problems created by this camera style — especially that shots can't be matched and smoothly joined. Fictions are constructed in a way congruent with the cinema verite approach. Narratives build on simple situations which are not filled in by detailed development or complex characterization.

This sort of filmmaking can be construed as an attack on Hollywood cinema. In fact, it was an attack on a certain kind of French cinema, the *cinéma du papa*, as seen in the films of Claude Autant Lara, Rene Clement, Jean Delannoy, the writers Aurenche and Bost. In fact, it affirmed a certain kind of Hollywood cinema, such as the small-scale thriller, the B-film, the productions of Monogram Studios. In making this affirmation, Godard was following the surrealists, who a generation earlier also had celebrated "naive" Hollywood films and made "crude" films like *UN CHIEN ANDALOU* as a protest against Art Cinema.

It's difficult for European intellectuals to reproduce Hollywood genre films, at least with any degree of conviction. Almost by definition, they



remain estranged from such forms of mass art. Of those who have worked in this territory, Jean-Pierre Melville perhaps came closest to making convincing versions of the thriller gangster film. Formed in the self-consciously intellectual milieu of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Godard, despite an affection for Melville's work, was unable to follow him in his efforts to create pure genre films.

Godard's early films were based on an ironic awareness of this situation. They both re-created Hollywood genre films. At the same time by devices like mixed genres, displaced conventions, overt references, his films marked a distance from the Hollywood ones. Godard clearly wanted to validate his films through a strong intellectual dimension. He was not content to express ideas through mise-en-scene in the way that he claimed Nicholas Ray did, but he gave ideas an overt presence in his films.

Paradoxically, in all Godard's films a distance is usually established from these ideas. Sometimes, as in Jean-Pierre Melville's appearance in *BREATHLESS*, the ideas turn out to be nonsensical. Sometimes the context leaves their status uncertain — in *VIVRE SA VIE* an actual philosopher appears, Brice Parain, to discuss his ideas in a fictional film with a fictional prostitute. Sometimes ideas are deliberately undercut — e.g., Roger Leenhardt's monologue in *UNE FEMME MARIE* is followed by the emergence of a sleepy child who gives his own absurd monologue.

It's not clear in what way Godard's early films are being offered to their audiences. In the films, there is a double distancing — from cinema as a form of popular entertainment, and from cinema as a form of intellectual statement. This double distancing effectively confesses the absence of a more positive strategy. Godard's radical uncertainty in this respect distinguishes him from his fellow *Cahiers* directors — Francois Truffaut, Claude Chabrol, Jacques-Doniol Valcroze, and Eric Rohmer (Jacques Rivette is probably closest to Godard). All these directors have more confidence in cinematic strategies based on fictions, through they use fictions which draw more on traditional art cinema forms that critique bourgeois life than on Hollywood genre films.

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From *PIERROT LE FOU* onwards, the fictions in Godard's films become increasingly attenuated. In effect, he reverses the relation between the fiction and the disruptions, so that the disruptions structure the film. This change of strategy has been taken by critics as a mark of Godard's politicization and his development of a critique of Hollywood cinema. Central to this critical account of Godard's work is the critic's identification of Hollywood cinema with a specific fictional strategy. This cinema, according to James Roy McBean, in his introduction to the script of *WIND FROM THE EAST*,

"pretends to ignore the presence of the spectator, pretends that what is being said and done on the movie screen is not aimed at the spectator. Hollywood pretends that the cinema

is a 'reflection of reality.' Yet all the time it plays on his emotions and capitalizes on spectatorial identification and projection mechanisms in order to induce viewers subtly, insidiously, unconsciously to participate in the dreams and fantasies that are marketed by bourgeois, capitalist society." (*WEEKEND and WIND FROM THE EAST*, ed. Nicholas Fry, trans. Marianne Sinclair and Danielle Adkinson, London: Lorrimer, 1972, p. 112).

The argument derives from traditional suspicions about fiction, the effect of which is described in terms of lies, delusions, misleading appearances. In a modern form, such criticism has been the basis of a pervasive, half-articulated response on the part of intellectuals to mass art. It is thought that mass art's workings are analogous to processes which produce loss of consciousness, like drug consumption. In recent film criticism, this suspicion is often cast in a psychoanalytic idiom. Film viewers are seen as remaining within the Imaginary, as defined by Jacques Lacan.

Such a critique of mass art is at best partial and politically naive; at worse, it is misleading and politically reactionary. To produce fictions offering themselves as descriptions of the real is one of Hollywood's lesser artistic strategies. To produce "unself-conscious" fictions certainly remains a dominant Hollywood strategy, and this un-self-consciousness is sometimes offered as a definition of realism. But if Hollywood films do work within this definition, usually Hollywood presents its fictions not as descriptions of the real but as precisely the opposite, as fantasies, make-believe entertainment that works from a refusal to be dominated by the real. The global success of such types of presentations can be seen, for example, in ordinary conversation, where "Hollywood" is used as a synonym for "unreality" — "pure Hollywood," or "How Errol Flynn won the war," etc.

This critique about Hollywood "realism," through its preoccupation with fiction, masks the relation films like *WIND FROM THE EAST* have with artistic strategies often found in Hollywood films. Certain Hollywood films seem based on an idea of viewers who can only be captured by assaulting them — through speed, shock, disruptiveness, and discontinuity. This aesthetic approach is characteristic of a sector of Hollywood cinema which includes the crime film, crazy comedy, and cartoon films — all of which Godard wrote admiringly about in his early criticism. In making films later in his career like *WIND FROM THE EAST*, Godard perhaps owed most to the films of Frank Tashlin. *WIND FROM THE EAST* might well be thought of a film which introduces "gags" into all levels of its construction.

However, it isn't self-evident that this strategy produces an art less amenable to U.S. capitalism than one based on the production of fictions as descriptions of an external reality. Its aesthetic methods celebrate qualities like aggression and dynamism, ones central to the U.S. capitalist enterprise. In a way, such tactics articulate a significant

cultural configuration; Godard's political-cinematic shift proves another way of "rediscovering the U.S."

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The Dziga Vertov Group is credited with the making of *WIND FROM THE EAST*. It's not clear this group ever amounted to more than Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin. However, the homage to Vertov provides a valuable insight into Godard's later films. Why should Vertov be chosen rather than Eisenstein, Shub, Pudovkin, Kuleshov or Dovzhenko as the group's emblem?

Of all the Soviet filmmakers, Vertov is closest to Futurism, with its celebration of the modern world. Futurism approached the modern world's technological, urban character, and tried to find artistic forms appropriate to the machine structures, speed and discontinuities of this "new" world. The United States, of course, represented the epitome of this new world. Godard's films show an excitement similar to that of the Futurists about the modern world, and like them, Godard connects this excitement with the United States. In Godard's earlier films the excitement manifests itself more within the fiction: cars are prominent, with travel and mobility treated enthusiastically. In later Godard's films, this tendency manifests itself more on the level of form.

Godard, in fact, reproduces Dziga Vertov's split attitude to U.S. culture. Both reject Hollywood cinema as a cinema of illusion, yet they admire U.S. dynamism and innovativeness. Still, neither director notes the importance of both these qualities for Hollywood films.

Godard does not simply mimic Vertov's work. *WIND FROM THE EAST* isn't just a remake of Vertov's *MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA*. There are noteworthy differences in the films, which are highlighted by the directors' attitudes to cinema itself. Vertov sees cinema in the optimistic perspective of technological transformation. To him, the camera becomes representative of technology, and, in *MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA*, it is celebrated as a marvelous toy with a magical power to transform. Godard's evident enthusiasm for cinema is compromised by his pessimistic perspective on sign systems, which can lie about the world and prevent its transformation. This pessimism produces in Godard's work a Dadaist strain, revealing an impulse to destroy cinema as well as to celebrate it.

The characters' individualism in Godard's films, their isolation, the way they relate to others critically and intellectually, has often been noted. This conception of character bears the marks of Cartesianism, though Godard's Cartesianism seems strongly marked by Existentialism. Such a perspective not only influences Godard's conception of character but the overall structuring of his fictions. At the characters' center is the individual's critical ego trying to come to terms with an alien world lacking value and meaning. This lack of value distinguishes the modern world, and Godard sees indications that in the past the world did have value and meaning. In the modern world, violent action seems the most

viable choice.

As the fictions lose their centrality in Godard's films, and as politics becomes more overt, Cartesianism becomes, if anything, more pronounced. Commentary replaces plot as the organizer of the films. These commentaries are cast in the mode of critical questioning. They offer themselves as a political version of the Cartesian strategy of systematic doubt, a refusal to accept the easy and obvious answers offered by bourgeois society. But the character of the commentary, the relentlessness of the questioning, its wideness of range, the speed and force with which it is delivered make it, difficult for an audience to respond intellectually. As it is worked out on the sound track, the strategy doesn't favor critical inquiry.

LETTER TO JANE focuses the problem. Given Jane Fonda's situation as a woman and film star, given her radicalization and her relationship as an actress with Godard and Gorin, what she represents overall demands careful examination. The film's opening acknowledges this, but the acknowledgement proves rhetorical. What Fonda represents is subjected not to critical inquiry but aggressive denunciation. One photograph becomes the subject for a number of dubious and crude assertions which often have McCarthyite overtones.

The following section of commentary is a good example of the methods in LETTER TO JANE:

“JPG: We can find this same expression already in the 1940s used by Henry Fonda to portray an exploited worker in the future fascist Steinbeck's GRAPES OF WRATH.”

“JLG: And even further back in the actress' paternal history, within the history of the cinema, it was still the same expression that Henry Fonda used to cast a profound and tragic look on the black people in YOUNG MR. LINCOLN made by the future admiral of the Navy, John Ford.”

“JPG: One can also find this expression on the opposite side as John Wayne expresses his deep regrets about the devastation of the war in Vietnam in THE GREEN BERETS. In our opinion this expression has been borrowed, principle and interest, from the free trade mark of Roosevelt's New Deal. In fact it's an expression of an expression, and it appears inevitably by chance just as the talkies were becoming a financial success. This expression talks, but only to say how much it knows about the stock market crash, for example. But says nothing more than how much it knows ...“

A series of links is made: Jane Fonda with Henry Fonda; Henry Fonda with THE GRAPES OF WRATH and the "future fascist" John Steinbeck; via THE GRAPES OF WRATH, Henry Fonda is then linked with YOUNG MR. LINCOLN and the "future admiral of the Navy," John Ford; from Ford, there is an implicit link with John Wayne and his

support for the Vietnam war. All of this is then linked to the New Deal. All the connections are flimsy ones. They allow Godard and Gorin to present U.S. history as an inevitable movement from the New Deal to Vietnam. Hollywood becomes simply identified as the ideological arm of capitalism. Politics, art, economics, ideology join together. Left and Right merge into each other. From the starting point of a single news photograph, Jane Fonda's efforts to support the North Vietnamese is made to seem an integral part of imperialism's activities.

It would be naive to be uncritical of Jane Fonda's politics, but the overall aggressiveness of *LETTER TO JANE* — those insistent voices on the sound track, the yoking together of so many disparate features into a radical denunciation of the world, all of which are characteristic features of Godard's later films — call to mind Roman Jakobson's judgment of Mayakovsky's poetry:

“If we should attempt to translate Mayakovsky's mythology into the language of speculative philosophy, the exact equivalent of this enmity would be the opposition of 'ego' and 'not ego.' It would be hard to find a more adequate name for the enemy.” (Edward G. Brown, *Mayakovsky*, Princeton: Princeton University Press).

Godard has been an extremely influential figure in cinema for the cultural left for a long time now. But if the obvious roadblocks his work has run into are to be avoided by others, he needs to be displaced from the central position he has occupied.

## Notes

The account of Godard that I have been challenging can be found in numerous books and articles. The most straightforward accounts of the position can be found in Peter Wollen's essay, "Counter Cinema: VENT D'EST" (*Afterimage*, No. 4, Autumn 1972) and in James Roy McBean's *Film and Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975).

Cohn McCabe's *Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics* (London: BFI/Macmillan, 1980) appeared after I had written this essay. It makes a substantial enough case for Godard to deserve to be dealt with separately. However, its account does not basically differ from the one I have discussed.

### Godard and Gorin's left politics, 1967-1972

by Julia Lesage

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To consider an artist's politics, especially a didactic artist's, raises key issues about aesthetics. To evaluate Jean-Luc Godard's politics in his explicitly left political films of 1967-72, we should ask what principles he applied to his work, why he did so, and what the historical context of those films was. These issues are important to consider critically because the artistic strategies which Godard then developed have since widely influenced other radical filmmakers worldwide. Furthermore, the events in France in May 1968 influenced many artists and intellectuals, who, like Godard, turned with a renewed interest to the aesthetic concepts of Bertolt Brecht.

Godard's political evolution was gradual. Aesthetically, he used Brechtian techniques in an anti-illusionist way for social comment and critique years before he turned to the left. In his public persona as a lionized artist, in the mid-sixties, he first lived out the role of the alienated genius making pure cinema. Then he denounced the film industry and attacked French society from a leftist position in interviews and in his films. And when he put explicitly political issues into cinematic form, this led in turn to a drastic decline in how the public would accept his works.

Godard stated that the May 68 civil rebellion in France had a decisive effect on him, an effect clearly seen in his films. In addition, his post-68 films referred to the French far-left "Maoist" milieu. Often the films' subject matter dealt with very topical political issues. The films also raised many theoretical issues. Yet they always treated their political subject matter with formal innovation. To criticize the political perspective of Godard's films from 1967-72, the critic must enter the dialogue on Marxist and modernist grounds. Godard's films of that period demanded both a specifically political response and a politically-oriented aesthetic response as they strove to present social and political issues in a "non-bourgeois" film form.

Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin, his co-worker of those years, frequently gave tongue-in-cheek interviews. These interviews reflected aesthetic positions and referred to political events, but incompletely or unsatisfyingly. However, Godard and Gorin made their 1967-72 films, such as *LE GAI SAVOIR*, *VENT D'EST*, *PRAVDA*, and *LETTER TO JANE*, as "essays," essays about political issues and about radical film aesthetics. They provide more complete statements of Godard and Gorin's political concerns than does any interview, but they offer that information in a non-linear, witty, and distanced way. As I discuss here the political ideas found in the 1967-72 films, I have often had to separate these ideas out from their filmic presentation. Of necessity here, I have flattened and simplified political concepts. They must finally be reconsidered within the artistic complexity of each film as a whole. (1)

### GODARD'S POLITICS BEFORE 1968

Godard stated that the first time he deliberately tried to make a, "political" film was in 1966 with *MASCULIN-FÉMININ*. (2) Somber cinematography, contemporary Paris as seen by its youth, male adolescent idealism, conversation after conversation carried on in interview form — these elements in the film made critics call it a sociological "document." (3) Godard did not give the characters in *MASCULIN-FÉMININ* much overt political sophistication, yet critics noted how much these adolescents talked about Marx. The film also continued Godard's protest against U.S. involvement in Vietnam, which he had started in *PIERROT LE FOU* and continued in successive films.

Then in 1966 Godard openly criticized the film industry and denounced the way capitalist financing and ideological expectations shaped films. He made *MASCULIN-FÉMININ*, he said, to reject a cinema of "spectacle." That kind of film had come to Europe through Hollywood but was also found in the USSR. (4) Furthermore, under French law, scriptwriters and directors did not have professional respect. Regulations that began during the Vichy regime still controlled them. They had to get legal authorizations to make films, get licensed as directors and technicians, and follow strict procedures for film financing. Aware of how the film and television industries conveyed bourgeois ideology, Godard had no illusions about commercial cinema's being influenced by any kind of workers' movement. He saw people as universally conditioned to traditional ideas about cinema. He said even those workers who knew how to go on strike for higher salaries would still reject the films that could help them the most.

For many years Godard railed against the commercial system that required directors to make "clowns" of themselves. He hated having to produce a script for inspection in order to finance feature films. In 1966, Godard called himself both a sniper against the system and a prisoner within it: these two roles seemed part of the same thing. (5) Later he said that he had escaped from a stultifying bourgeois family into the world of pure cinema. But he found after a few years as director that the

commercial production-distribution process had trapped him within an equally stultifying but larger bourgeois family. With LE GAI SAVOIR he partially dropped out of this route for making films. Certainly his films after WEEKEND did not reach people in commercial theaters. Yet in 1972, after returning to big-budget feature film production with TOUT VA BIEN, Godard and Gorin denied that they had ever been able to leave the system. They noted that the Dziga-Vertov Group films and the ones made by Godard himself in the 1968-72 period had been financed primarily by national television networks and by Grove Press. (6)

After breaking his partnership with Gorin, Godard turned to one of his other great loves, television. In 1974 he set up, with his new co-director Anne-Marie Miéville, an experimental TV and video studio in Grenoble. As early as 1966 he had told interviewers that his greatest dream was to direct news programs in television. He also described the two wide-screen color films he was making then, MADE IN USA and DEUX OU TROIS CHOSES, as *actualités*, or news reports:

"All my films derive from intimate connections with the country's situation, from news documents, perhaps treated in a particular way, but functioning in relation to contemporary reality." (7)

Godard thought of making a new program as a fabricated event, often fictional, that the social reality behind surface appearances. In this he always remained very close to Bertolt Brecht's concept of realism and to the Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov's concept of news. Godard developed this concept of "the news" long before coining the name "Dziga Vertov Group." In 1967 LA CHINOISE presented "news" of Vietnam in a little Brechtian skit. This skit followed a political discussion the characters had had about the best form for cinematic newsreels. Guillaume, a self-professed "Brechtian" actor, said he had heard a lecture by Cinémathèque director Henri Langlois proving that the film pioneer Lumière had filmed exactly the same things Picasso, Renoir and Manet were painting then: railroad stations, public places, people playing cards, people leaving factories, and tramways. Thus Lumière seemed like one of the last great Impressionists, like Proust. But Méliès, Guillaume said, filmed fantasies which revealed actual social and technological possibilities. For example, Méliès filmed the trip to the moon:

"Well, he made newscasts. Maybe the manner in which he did it made them reconstituted newscasts, but it was really news. And I'll go even further: I'll say that Méliès was Brechtian." (8)

At this point the group launched into a short analysis of why Méliès was Brechtian. They drew their analysis from Mao's *On Contradiction*. Mao said Marxism depended on concrete analysis. To analyze a situation, one had to see things as complex, determined by many factors. People had to trace out and analyze the many contradictions in things and phenomena and to study problems under their different aspects, not just under one



main one. The characters proclaimed that Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin had taught them conscientiously to study situations, starting from objective reality and not from personal, subjective desire. (9)

Such political-aesthetic lessons seemed to reflect Godard's own views. Also in LA CHINOISE, Godard had the characters eliminate writers' names from a blackboard until only Brecht's name was left. Yet even though Godard had defined himself as a "left-wing anarchist" then, (10) in many ways LA CHINOISE scoffed at its idealist revolutionaries. In 1967 Godard still romantically strove to capture an instant — an instant of decision, yes, but not yet showing social mechanisms capable of being specifically changed. In his work from 1967-1972, he came to examine left revolution, although since then he has not always continued in the same vein.

### GODARD'S POLITICAL ACTIVISM

LOIN DE VIETNAM significantly brought together French directors to work collectively to create a political film. These same directors would mobilize their forces to react with mass demonstrations against Cinémathèque director Henri Langlois' firing in early 1968. The Langlois affair provided a rallying point for French intellectuals, especially in the way that it brought to light their intense dissatisfaction with the strict control the Gaullist government maintained over cultural and intellectual affairs. In February 1968, the Administrative Council of the Cinémathèque, under pressure from the CNC (Centre nationale du cinéma) and with the agreement of Minister of Culture André Malraux, summarily decided not to renew Langlois' contract as artistic and administrative director of the Cinémathèque Française. After massive protests in the press, Malraux relented and offered Langlois the position of artistic administrator only, which meant that he could collect films but not program their showing. Since the Cinémathèque was the only place to show many radical films, almost all French filmmakers found Malraux's compromise gesture unacceptable. They rejected it as fascist.

Godard led the protests against the government. He called press conferences with other filmmakers in which he expressed his total dissatisfaction with the Gaullist system of cultural control. He demonstrated that the government controlled almost all commercial film production through the ORTF and CNC, but that now the CNC wanted to extend its control to the independent showings of films, often radical ones, in the ciné clubs and the Cinémathèque. (11)

France saw a quick and overwhelming reaction against Langlois' firing. On February 14, 1968, Godard led 3,000 demonstrators against the police guarding the Cinémathèque. He was slightly wounded. Immediately forty French directors forbade the Cinémathèque to show their films. Many continued to work with Godard and to get other filmmakers and filmmakers' heirs to refuse to let their films be shown at the Cinémathèque unless Langlois was reinstated with full powers. The rapidity with which the street protests took place, the government's total misunderstanding of the French intellectual climate, and the breaking

down of factions among intellectuals to arrive at a consensus about the need for united action — all of these factors made the Langlois affair prefigure May's university protests.

During the civil rebellion in May-June 1968, filmmakers joined with dissatisfied radio and television workers to form a communication workers' organization: the États Généraux du Cinéma. Godard's main participation in the États Généraux was to interrupt and close down the 1968 Cannes film festival. On May 16 Godard met at Cannes with the Committee for the Defense of the Cinémathèque. Presumably they had originally planned to use the festival to push the Langlois affair a step further, but at their meeting Godard convinced his fellow filmmakers to occupy the largest festival screening room to close it down. They did this on May 18. Many of the cineastes gathered at Cannes were already questioning such a festival's very function at that point in French history. Judges withdrew from the jury; directors withdrew their films. The radicals had effectively shut the festival down.

#### GODARD AND THE MAY-JUNE 1968 FRENCH CIVIL REBELLION

Godard was profoundly affected, as were many French intellectuals, by the May-June civil rebellion in 1968. Europe, especially France, had seen the embourgeoisment of the parliamentary left and thus the decline of an effective left opposition to capitalism. But the May '68 events in France revived a previously muted revolutionary consciousness and demonstrated the students' potentially key role as a dynamic radical force. Later, after the civil rebellion, Marxist theoreticians turned once again to examine French society to examine capitalism's weaknesses — to see where the contradictions could be aggravated, where the revolution might occur. Political authors Henri Lefèbvre, André Gorz, Louis Althusser, and Godard's friend, André Glucksmann described conditions leading up to the May civil rebellion. They saw it in terms of such factors as the proletarianization of the white collar working forces, conditions causing student dissatisfaction with higher education, ever-increasing corporate reliance on the mass media to create consensus and increase consumption, and a greater role which bourgeois ideological dominance played in controlling class conflict and in reproducing capitalist production relations. [\(12\)](#)

Not only students but workers played a leading role in the 1968 revolt. Rebelling in the work force were young technicians, highly skilled but with no decision-making power, and also young unskilled workers, who were underpaid and performed boring, repetitive tasks. The striking workers consistently raised qualitative demands rather than just quantitative wage demands. Correspondingly, life-style issues, the politics of daily life, and workers' control (described by Godard as the "dictatorship of the proletariat") became key issues in Godard's films from 1968 on.

In France, the largest and strongest leftwing organization is the Communist Party (the PCF), which controls the largest labor union (the CGT, Confédération générale du travail). The PCF has a whole

mechanism for diffusing its ideas, and it controls a certain stable percentage of the vote in each election. In France, it seems conservative to many radicals, since its goals of material progress reflect those of the middle class and its parliamentary role has never been revolutionary. In the 68 revolt, the PCF turned the tide against the demonstrators by cooperating with the government.

A widespread critique of the Communist Party followed in the wake of the 1968 uprisings. Rejection of the PCF characterized all of the "Maoist" groups in France, who turned to the Chinese Cultural Revolution as a model for political and social theory and practice. Godard, following this general trend, criticized in his films from 1968 on, especially in *PRAVDA* and *VENT D'EST*, Communist failures to be truly revolutionary, both in France and in other European countries.

It was in such an atmosphere that Godard committed himself to working as Marxist filmmaker. From 1968 to 1973, he stated repeatedly that he was working collectively. He was never tied to a party or a Maoist group, although the politics evidenced in his films seem loosely "Maoist." For about three years he drastically reduced the technical complexity and expense of his filming, lab work, compositions, and sound mix. Partly he wanted to demonstrate that anyone could and should make films. He did not concern himself with creating a parallel distribution circuit. He said most political films were badly made, so the contemporary political filmmakers had a twofold task. They had to find new connections, new relations between sound and image. And they should use film as a blackboard on which to write analyses of socio-economic situations. Godard rejected films, especially political ones, based on feeling. People, he said, had to be led to analyze their place in history. At this point, especially from about 1968-70, Godard defined himself as a worker in films.

Only during the Langlois affair and at the Cannes 68 festival did Godard take an activist role in organizing political protests. During May 68 and since then he defined his political tasks almost exclusively as aesthetic ones. As in *LOIN DE VIETNAM*, making films politically meant for Godard and Gorin finding the best combination of sounds and images for "revolutionary" films. For four years Godard took his separation from Establishment cinema and its mode of production and distribution seriously. He did not return to big budget filmmaking until *TOUT VA BIEN* in 1972. However, from 1968 on, for Godard "making films politically" remained mainly a *formal* concern. (13)

In early June 68, Godard filmed *UN FILM COMME LES AUTRES*. The sound track consisted of an uninterrupted political conversation among three Nanterre students and two workers from the Renault-Flins plant. In the cinematography of the discussion at Nanterre, Godard filmed hands, legs, bodies in the grass or close ups of someone listening. It was often hard to tell who was speaking or to understand the political references. By refusing to show faces talking, once again Godard contested a television interview style, which accustomed viewers to

hearing people speak but not to consider the act of listening. Intercut among that footage was newsreel-type, black-and-white footage of the May events themselves, which the group was talking about in retrospect. On the one hand, Godard strove to register the historical forces of that moment. On the other, he made an interminably long film, seemingly lacking in political analysis, and very much influenced by the *spontanéisme* of the rebellion. (14)

During the tumultuous days of Paris street action, Godard along with other filmmakers made unsigned three-minute ciné-tracts. The tracts' anonymity served to abolish the famous-director cult and to protect the maker. Many ciné-tracts showed shots of political graffiti or the action on the barricades. Predictably Godard's stood out aesthetically. Sometimes he just inscribed, a political pun such as LA RÉVOLUTION/L'ART ÉVOLUTION on a black frame. As Godard described the procedure,

"Take a photo and statement by Lenin or Che, divide the sentence into ten parts, one word per image, then add the photo that corresponds to the meaning either with or against it." (15)

In collected form, the ciné-tracts were to be shown in July 1968, but by then the government could effectively censor their public exhibition.

#### THE MAOIST GROUPS IN FRANCE

In the mid-60s Jean-Pierre Gorin belonged to a political group, the UJCML (Union de Jeunesses communistes — Marxistes-léninistes). This was one of the two principal Maoist or Marxist-Leninist organizations in France before May-June 1968, when the government outlawed both. This group and the PCMLF (Parti Communiste Marxiste-léniniste de France) came about as part of organizational splits from the French Communist Party, especially among its student wing, over the Stalin question and the Sino-Soviet split in 1962-63. Both groups rejected the PCF's overthrow of Stalin's "cult of the personality." They defended much in Stalin's theoretical writings and political practice. Both groups saw in the Chinese Cultural Revolution a fundamental way to fight western Communist Parties' failure to commit themselves to revolution (revisionism) and their concentration on purely economic gains for the working class (economism).

Sorbonne professor Louis Althusser had a student following within the PCF's youth group (the UEC). In April 1966, that youth group published a brochure attacking the French Communist Party Central Committee's "Resolution" on culture and ideology. The students protested that the Party wanted to turn Marxism into a humanism, for the PCF had spoken generally in the "Resolution of the "vaste mouvement créateur de l'esprit humaine." To cite from the UEC brochure:

"For Marxist-Leninists, there can only be a politics of culture; they can't defend culture abstractly ... Culture can be

a specific, direct form of the class struggle ... It [popular culture] isn't wedded to a theme that's been decreed "popular"; as Lenin said, the workers don't want literature written for workers ... Culture takes on a different meaning when the party has not yet assumed power from when it's already leading the construction of socialism ... There isn't a humankind, but rather capital, a working class, a peasantry, and intellectuals. Therefore, stop talking about the past: talk about French intellectuals in the new conditions of our epoch ... Remember what Lenin said: spontaneously, intellectuals take on the dominant ideology as their own. What is this ideology? Under the circumstances, monopolistic. And so that state, which-belongs to the monopolies, is large, and there's place for the intellectuals in its administration, within the administrative councils." (16)

I cite this document at length because it foreshadowed Godard's decisions — to film outside the "cultural monopolies" and to fight certain forms of artistic representation in ideological "preparation" for revolution. The first official document of the UJCML was published in the *Cahiers Marxistes-léninistes* in early 1967. Jean-Pierre Gorin was probably on the journal's staff then. (17) In the UJCML's statement we can see prefigured the way Godard consistently defined himself from 1968-72 as an intellectual revolutionary, admittedly bourgeois in origins and lifestyle but tied to the working class in their ideological and political struggle toward socialism. The UJCML used as its model the way the Red Guard student groups took a leadership role in the Chinese Communist Party, and the way that those groups strove to apply Marxist *theory* to change society.

In its statement of principles, the UJCML did not emphasize forming a far-left party. Rather it had these goals:

1. to struggle against bourgeois ideology, particularly in the forms of pacifism, humanism, and spirituality;
2. to create a "red" university which would serve advanced workers and all revolutionary elements;
3. to contribute to the anti-imperialist struggles already being waged by French youth and unqualifiedly to support North Vietnam until victory; and
4. to form revolutionary intellectuals who would ally themselves with workers and to create alternative organizations to that end.

This platform of the UJCML, I think, makes it clear why in the late 60s Godard and Gorin would often find themselves closer to the American New Left than to other groups in France committed to factory work and party building. More than did the other Maoist group, the PCMLF, the UJCML analyzed the university as "a repressive apparatus in the hands of the bourgeoisie, an apparatus that should be smashed and not improved." (18) And the UJCML asserted the importance of encouraging political youth groups such as black nationalists, women's



liberation, or national liberation fronts to develop autonomously. In France, they argued, these groups should not be coerced to submit to the central direction of any new far-left party. Godard and Gorin's effort to make a film about the U.S. New Left, VLADIMIR AND ROSA, illustrated a kind of analysis drawn from the UJCML.

Godard and Gorin interpreted the principle of "going to the masses" according to the model of the Red Guard in the Chinese Cultural Revolution. That is, Godard and Gorin felt they had to offer political activists a theoretical discussion about film's ideological dimensions, especially political film's. Although Godard and Gorin asserted that revolution did not come from the ideological sphere and that the proletariat was the revolutionary force, nevertheless, they felt they could do their work outside the structure of any political organization or party.

In the years immediately following the 1968 rebellion, Godard stated that he was working collectively. He directed LE GAI SAVOIR, ONE PLUS ONE, and BRITISH SOUNDS by himself. But in 1969 he worked loosely with other people, especially in the formative stages of planning and even shooting a film. He usually edited these "collective" projects himself. In March 1969, Godard went with Jean-Henri Roger and Paul Burron to Czechoslovakia where they clandestinely filmed the images that Godard would use later in PRAVDA. According to Gérard Leblanc in an article in VH 101, where Leblanc analyzed the political positions of the Dziga Vertov Group represented in VENT D'EST, the "line" that dominated PRAVDA was "spontanéiste-dogmatique." That is to say, although the filmmakers constructed PRAVDA around a critique of Communist Party revisionism, they filmed images "spontaneously" as snatches of reality, in what Godard would call a candid-camera style and repudiate in aesthetic and political terms. Jean-Pierre Gorin did not seem to be part of the group at the time of the filming of PRAVDA.

In June 1969, Godard gathered together in Italy the major participants from last year's student-worker uprising, including the student leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit. Godard had financed this film on the grounds that these famous students would make an Italian western about the 1968 French events. (In fact, he gave about half the money to radical student causes.) This group followed an ultra-democratic procedure, debating everything, so they filmed LUTTE EN ITALIE. According to Gorin, at that point Godard summoned him from Paris to Italy. (19) As Gorin described it, "The two Marxists really willing to do the film took power," and they finished the film. (20) Gérard Leblanc described the political struggle after Gorin's arrival for control of VENT D'EST as follows: The ex-militant of the UJCML (Gorin) and the part of the group that took a conciliatory position (Godard?) defeated the "spontanéiste-dogmatique" line that had dominated PRAVDA (Roger). And the ex-militant of UJCML had a theoretical line which would, Leblanc said, totally dominate the later making of LUTTES EN ITALIE. (21)

According to Gorin, he edited VENT D'EST and, following that, Godard edited PRAVDA. (22) Since they structured both films by voice-over

commentaries added after the shooting, the two men had complete control over the images' interpretation, no matter what the original intent was when these images were shot. Upon seeing both completed films and noting their similarity, Godard and Gorin realized that Godard's role as the single creative "genius" (genius being a commodity that sells directors) had, as they wished, really been broken down.

"We realized that even if people were looking at them as Jean-Luc's films, they were not Jean-Luc's films. So we decided to raise the Dziga-Vertov flag at that time, and even to recuperate some of the things Jean-Luc had made alone during the discussions we had — like SEE YOU AT THE MAO (U.S. release title for BRITISH SOUNDS) and PRAVDA ... Working as a group for us had always been the two of us working together ... [It is] a good means to cope with the traditional ideology of group filmmaking, collective filmmaking—which was a real crap hanging around after May 68 among the moviemakers. Everybody was going to get collective ... and nothing came out of it. And this was a good way to cope with it because Jean-Luc had the idea of making a collective film (VENT D'EST) ... Even two people working together dialectically is a step forward ... The bad thing is that we've never been able to extend ourselves." [\(23\)](#)

It seems that Godard and Gorin periodically revised their own political filmmaking history for presentation to the public. In the December 1970 issue of *Cinéma 70*, an interview with Godard bore the title, "Le Groupe Dziga Vertov. Jean-Luc Godard parle au nom de ses camarades du groupe: Jean-Pierre Gorin, Gérard Martain, Nathalie Billard, et Armand Marco." That list significantly leaves out the names of Roger and Burron, of PRAVDA, nor does it include that of Anne Wiazemsky, whom Godard married in 1968 and who appeared in many of his films from 1967-72 (Godard often put in her mouth his own radical words to say). Armand Marco would act as Godard's cameraperson from 1968 through TOUT VA BIEN in 1972. Yet in TOUT VA BIEN the film's credits no longer claimed Marco as an equal in Godard and Gorin's collective enterprise.

## POLITICAL STRATEGIES IN THE POST-1968 FILMS

What did it mean for Godard and Gorin to make "political films politically"? Godard had reacted to May 68, which demanded a response from French intellectuals. He also reacted against his own past role as an apolitical filmmaker hailed as a creative genius. The Dziga Vertov Group films quote Mao Tse Tung's command to artists at the Yenan Forum in 1942: to "struggle on two fronts," i.e., to present revolutionary political content and to perfect artistic form. This dictum had a profound normative influence not only on the Dziga Vertov Group but also on many French Maoist writers and cultural critics, such as those in *Tel Quel*, *Cinéthique*, and *Cahiers du cinéma* (briefly after 1972). [\(24\)](#)

Yet the relation between "cultural revolution" and the potential for

socialist revolution in an advanced capitalist country such as France was not clear. Marx and Lenin did not tackle the problem, nor did Mao, from whom the model for cultural revolution originally came. Obviously film in and of itself did not make revolution, but new Marxist revolutionary theory had to take into account mass media and their role in cultural control.

For Godard, reacting against what he had labeled in *MADE IN U.S.A.* the "sentimentality" of the left, following Mao meant to make films with an expressly political content in a revolutionary form. In the content of these films from 1967 on, Godard tried to articulate the relations between contemporary history, ideology, aesthetics, and mass media, and the potential for revolution or its authenticity (in the case of Russia and Czechoslovakia). Although Mao's advice to artists concerned only artistic quality and not Brechtian or modernist innovations in form, for Godard and Gorin the struggle on two fronts came to mean two things: (1) to fight the bourgeoisie and "its ally, revisionism" [\(25\)](#) and (2) to critique political errors within a new leftist cinematic form.

The political and aesthetic ideas Godard raised in the political films from *LE GAI SAVOIR* on delineate his theoretical concerns. Yet those films often presented ideas as slogans or in some other distanced way. Godard never handed the audience a completely worked out political theory or program of action. Audiences had to work with the concepts presented to create their own political syntheses. In many cases, only by disagreeing with one or more of the specific political points that Godard and Gorin raised, could the audience enact what the makers had hoped their films would achieve. The films' ideas were to be considered, erased, and amended dialectically in comparison with the audience's own political experience.

#### THE BRECHTIAN INFLUENCE ON THE DZIGA VERTOV GROUP FILMS

In the late 60s and early 70s while on tour in the U.S., Godard frequently indicated the degree to which his post-68 films depended on Brechtian principles.

"A movie is not reality, it is only a reflection. Bourgeois filmmakers focus on the reflection of reality. We are concerned with the reality of that reflection." [\(26\)](#)

Yet as Godard and Gorin collaborated on making political films, it was Gorin who strove to bring out the films' explicitly Brechtian element. In a 1972 interview, Gorin indicated that Godard had read mainly Brecht's poetry and writings on the theater, in French. In particular, they both had spent four years reading and discussing *Me-Ti*. This was Brecht's uncompleted book of aphorisms and personal and political anecdotes written while in exile in Denmark and Finland. When I met Godard briefly in April 1973, while on tour in the United States, both he and Gorin reaffirmed this book's importance for them. When I pressed to know why, Godard replied that it showed the need for a cultural



revolution. He said that he had borrowed from Brecht in the early 60s, just as he had borrowed many things in his films, and that he had begun to read Brecht's theories during his explicitly political filmmaking period.

Both Godard and Gorin paradoxically admitted that they had primarily an *aesthetic* interest in Brecht, especially as they explored the political implications of cinematic form. In 1972 with TOUT VA BIEN, Godard and Gorin had drawn away from their previous notion of distancing, which they had expressed in the 1969 Dziga Vertov Group films with unemotional, albeit dryly witty, filmmaking. When I asked Gorin what it meant for them to say they were making political films politically, he said that they meant this in a Brechtian sense — in terms of film form. Godard's television co-productions with Anne-Marie Miéville also reflected many of the same "Brechtian" considerations which Godard had explored intensively in the Dziga Vertov Group years.

Since Bertolt Brecht's prose fiction, *Me-Ti*, provided the basis for the sound track of both PRAVDA and VLADIMIR AND ROSA, at this point I shall detail how Godard used that text. In *Me-Ti*, Brecht presented short anecdotes, usually one or two pages long, related by some character with a Chinese name. Brecht drew the anecdotes' content partly from the ancient writings of Mo-zu (translated as Me-Ti in German) and also from contemporary politics, Brecht's personal life, and the Russian revolution. The entries in *Me-Ti* were both didactic and witty. The characters with Chinese names referred in code to Marx, Lenin, Engels, Stalin, Plekhanov, Luxemburg, Korsch, Trotsky, Hitler, Hegel, Brecht, Feuchtwanger, Anatole France, and Brecht's lover from the time he was in exile in Denmark. According to Gorin, what Godard liked about the book was the way characters with code names discussed politics and history in parables and short anecdotes.

In PRAVDA Godard and Gorin introduced the characters Vladimir and Rosa (Lenin and Luxemburg) who talked to each other in voice off, giving didactic lessons in long speeches. VLADIMIR AND ROSA applied the same concept in a more rambling way. In PRAVDA Godard borrowed content from *Me-Ti* directly. Furthermore, he used the book's conceptual principle to structure his film. To discuss potential relations between Czech workers and farmers, Godard cited an anecdote directly from Brecht's work about how Lenin handled a problem between blacksmiths making expensive steel plows (who symbolize the industrial proletariat) and independent small-scale farmers.

Godard also drew on Brecht's critique of Stalin in *Me-Ti*. The references to Stalin in *Me-Ti*, taken together, were complex and ambiguous. Toward the beginning of the book, Brecht referred favorably to Stalin's role in Russian history, but he critiqued Stalin scathingly in later pages. Brecht made no effort to reconcile the opposing attitudes toward Stalin represented by his different anecdotes. At one point in the novel, Brecht had his fictional philosopher Me-Ti attack Stalin in exactly the same way PRAVDA attacked contemporary Czech socialism. In this incident, Me-

Ti said:

"The farmers were fighting with the workers. At first they were living under a democracy but as the quarrel grew more intense, the state apparatus disassociated itself entirely from the workforce and took on a regressive form. Ni-en [Stalin] became, for the farmers, a kind of emperor, whereas in the eyes of the workers he remained an administrator. But when a class struggle developed among the workers, they too saw in Ni-en an emperor."

Kin-je [Brecht] asked: "Could we call that Ni-en's fault?"

Me-Ti said: "That he made national labor planning an economic rather than a political issue — that was an error." [\(27\)](#)

While Godard and Gorin utilized Brecht's critique of Stalinism they, along with other French Maoists, would not deny Stalin's role in building Russian communism. Neither did Brecht in *Me-Ti*. In splitting from the French Communist Party, French Maoists emphasized the significance of Stalin's writings and his political practice in building Russia's dictatorship of the proletariat. A section of PRAVDA was entitled "La Dictature du Proletariat." This section stressed the need for democracy among the proletariat, the model being the role of Red Guard youth agitating in the universities and among the people in China. As the sound track in PRAVDA stated,

"Without a large popular democracy, the dictatorship of the proletariat won't be able to consolidate itself. In all domains, the proletariat ought to exercise control over the bourgeoisie ... Tightly maintain the dictatorship of the proletariat and create the conditions for the passage to communism." [\(28\)](#)

Godard and Gorin manipulated the same concerns dialectically in PRAVDA as Brecht did in *Me-Ti*. Brecht and Godard and Gorin recognized the need to build and teach political theory. However, they insisted that intellectuals had to go to the people to discover what needed to be taught and that intellectuals needed new forms for effectively expressing their ideas. Among the people in Eastern Europe, workers had lost the right of democratic participation in and control over their own socialist governments. Regaining that control could only happen politically (thus the appeal of the Chinese Cultural Revolution to Godard and Bonn in PRAVDA). *Me-Ti* was subtitled *Buch der Wendungen* (*Book of Changes*). And in the book, Brecht offered not only extensive discussions of dialectics itself (*Me-Ti* called dialectical materialism *Die Grosse Methode*; in effect, dialectics are the *Wendungen*). One short section which illustrates the title of Brecht's book could apply equally well to Godard's PRAVDA:

"'About Changes.' Mien-leh [Lenin] taught this: The institution of democracy can lead to the institution of a

dictatorship. The institution of a dictatorship can lead to democracy."

In addition to influencing the structure and themes of PRAVDA and VLADIMIR AND ROSA, Me-Ti also provided TOUT VA BIEN's basic theme — that the individual must consider her/himself in historical terms. Fonda and Montand portrayed characters who had to learn that their "personal" situation also encompassed their work and their particular historical position. At one time, as news reporter Fonda tried to imagine fully the striking workers' experience of oppression, the image track showed her and Montand doing the meat packers' demeaning jobs. The protagonists saw themselves — in the third person, so to speak — imagining themselves in someone else's place. Similarly, *Me-Ti* had a section entitled, "On Looking at Oneself Historically." In this section, the philosopher Me-Ti asked that individuals observe themselves historically, just like social classes and large human groupings, and so to comport themselves historically. Life lived like matter for a biography takes on a certain weight and can make history.

In interviews Godard and Gorin stated specifically that they considered their goals and techniques in making TOUT VA BIEN Brechtian. In a long interview in *Le Monde*, Gorin stated clearly the film's debt to Brechtian theory:

"Q: Now, this film, with producers, with stars, what are its politics?"

"A: It's a realist film, but it's neither critical realism nor socialist realism (a bourgeois value and a bourgeoisified value). We've gone into a new type of realism, closer to Brechtian theory."

"First of all, it doesn't mask the real conditions of its production. That's the thesis of the first part of the film. It describes from the onset its economic and ideological reality, the weight given to the fiction, its function, and its actors. Because it's a question of constructing a fiction that'll always permit its own analysis and that will lead the spectator back into reality, the reality from which the film itself has come."

[\(29\)](#)

#### POLITICAL ISSUES RAISED IN THE FILMS: 1967-1972

Earlier in 1968 with films such as *LE GAI SAVOIR*, *ONE PLUS ONE*, and *UN FILM COMME LES AUTRES*, Godard considered opening up and deconstructing narrative film form as his primary political task. Under Godard's influence and in keeping with the general literary and philosophical trend then in France represented by Jacques Derrida, the *nouveau roman*, the Theater of the Absurd, and the Brecht revolution, leftist film magazines heralded "deconstructed" films, particularly the Dziga Vertov Group films, for their discontinuity, which was now seen to have a revolutionary political and ideological significance.

However, in discussing the cinematic structure and politics of Godard's post-67 work, it is all too easy to bandy about terms such as "Brechtian," "deconstructed," or "modernist" in an overgeneralized — and thus critically useless — way. Because Godard and Gorin implanted specific references in their films to political and aesthetic theory, it is important to know what concepts of ideology they were working with at that time. The way they framed their discussion of ideology relates specifically to their concerns with education, their attitude toward the 68 civil rebellion, and to more general attitudes in France about the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The theoretical and aesthetic concepts worked out in these films referred specifically to Godard and Gorin's political milieu and must be understood in those terms.

### "SPONTANÉISME"

Certain political positions taken in *LE GAI SAVOIR*, made in 1967-68, significantly disappear in the films made in 1969. In that film Godard approved of New Left politics, offered a Marcusean type analysis of cultural repression, and referred to Situationist Guy Debord's tract *La Société du spectacle*. (30) The Maoist group that Gorin had belonged to politically disapproved of spontaneous uprisings against repression. (Such uprisings were sparked and led by other political groups agitating in the universities in 1968.)

The 1969 Dziga Vertov Group films offered a persistent critique of spontaneous demonstrations and short-term political planning. Why there was such an emphasis placed on these problems in late 60s France has to be understood in terms of leftwing French politics as a whole. In 1945 after WW2, during the Algerian crisis, and in the 1968 student-worker general strike, the radical left felt it had almost enough power to bring off a socialist revolution. In each case, the subsequent left-critique was that both theory and strategy had been insufficient, leaving the left fragmented and easily co-opted. With a long history of socialism in France and a postwar history of near-successes, the French left could conceivably think it possible to construct a powerful radical organization which would aim at seizing power. Since May 68 the far left has not been able to agree whether or not spontaneous demonstrations and strikes effectively can test the trade union bureaucracy and the economic status quo, or whether or not they help build a revolutionary movement in France.

In the 1968 films, Godard and Gorin considered *spontanéisme* as both a political and aesthetic tactic, and they rejected it on both grounds. Aesthetically Godard and Gorin expressed contempt for a naturalistic or cinema verité style in which the politics seemingly resided on the surface of events. Directors following such a style, even though politically motivated, just filmed what happened." In contrast, just as one had to build a revolutionary theory, so Godard and Gorin wanted to build adequate images, usually very simple ones, to "make political films politically."

It is important to raise this issue of *spontanéisme* in reference to Godard's political development, because his films from 1968 on offered drastically different approaches to the subject. Sometimes his 68-72 films celebrated acting out of feeling and emotion and attending to the present moment. Other times those films rejected feeling and emotion while embracing political analysis. LE GAI SAVOIR, ONE PLUS ONE, UN FILM COMME LES AUTRES, and particularly BRITISH SOUNDS and VLADIMIR AND ROSA had sections that celebrated both feeling and spontaneous political action. Yet spontaneous action was directly critiqued in PRAVDA, VENT D'EST, and LUTTES EN ITALIE, and implicitly critiqued in TOUT VA BIEN and LETTER TO JANE. TOUT VA BIEN treated objectively, and even sympathetically, the spontaneous militancy among the workers of the Gauche Prolétarienne (a Maoist group) and the voluntaristic "guerrilla" actions carried out by a group of students raiding a supermarket. The film presented these as two of the major sources of struggle in France since 1968. At this point Godard and Bonn did not criticize *spontanéisme* as heavily as they did in 1969, but they were basically asking French intellectuals this question: "1968-1972: Where are you now?"

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Godard and Gorin's left politics, 1967-1972, page 2 by Julia Lesage

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### REVISIONISM

In VENT D'EST Godard and Gorin went so far as to call the French Communist Party (the PCF) "enemies who pose as Marxists." The film explicitly attacked the PCF, trade unionism in France, and the Russian Communist Party for abandoning the dictatorship of the proletariat and striving merely for economic progress. In class terms, Western European and American labor unions benefit from the economic position of their own countries, from the exploitation of Third World labor, and from the division of labor according to sex. The collaborationist union committeeman in VENT D'EST represented Godard and Gorin's scorn for what many in France saw as the unions' betrayal of the working class in their failure to make qualitative demands, so that workers could integrate the personal aspects of their life with their life on the job — thus the appeal of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. And if the workers' organizations were not helping the workers, neither were the well-intentioned university students. In LUTTES EN ITALIE, Paola, the bourgeoisie student, did not know how to approach the working class. First she talked to a sales clerk while shopping. Later she tried to act militantly by taking a job as a factory worker without really understanding the processes of social change.

In the critique of Russia in VENT D'EST, Godard and Gorin said that Breshnev Studios-Mosfilm had demanded the same film as Nixon-Paramount for fifty years: the Western. This triple pun about the Western referred to the backwardness of Soviet social realism as a film style and also to the fact that Russia had refused to acknowledge any lessons from China, the East. In addition, in PRAVDA, the voice off stated that the Russian government wanted its rubles to be worth Eurodollars. There were Czech workplaces that had not seen the revolution, for people were kept working in alienating jobs and functioning just like machines so as to build up capital. Czech industry demonstrated the whole problem of surplus value all over again. PRAVDA showed a Czech worker manufacturing armaments, as the voice off noted that the guns would be sold at a lower price than they

were in Czechoslovakia if they could bring in foreign currency, and that even when they were sold to North Vietnam, the Czech government did not care about educating the workers to know about their solidarity with an oppressed people. Finally, Godard's critique of labor's position in Russia, Czechoslovakia, the United States and France tied in with his Brechtianism, with one of the major themes in his films: How are subjective factors related to social and economic conditions, to class and to revolutionary change? Workers were still class beings, even if they did not clearly see that. But they must take a class stand.

## THE EDUCATIONAL APPARATUS AND POLITICAL EDUCATION OUTSIDE THAT APPARATUS

Central to Godard's own experience was the '68 student revolt. Even as early as 1967, in *LA CHINOISE*, he very clearly saw French university education as a class education, training a managerial and technocratic elite. Since even his earliest films had dealt with language, communication, false consciousness, and the mass media, Godard easily turned to examine the educational apparatus in its relation to the state.

In his cinematic portrayal of May 68, Godard sympathetically identified with the students and their slogans, written as graffiti all over Paris, such as, "Let the workers have the Sorbonne." In most of his post-68 films, Godard depicted what had become a common fact around the world in the late sixties: police repression and the whole of the state apparatus brought in to crush student protests. Godard admired the French student revolt, but he and Gorin criticized the Czech students shown in *PRAVDA*. As the Czech students demonstrated against Russian tanks, they carried a black flag of mourning and anarchy, not the red flag of revolution; *PRAVDA* accused them of suicidal humanitarianism.

Although Godard experienced the revolutionary potential of the 68 protests in France and supported the idea of a worker-student alliance, he realized these issues' complexity. In films such as *LE GAI SAVOIR* and *VENT D'EST* he portrayed the 68 protests with symbolic images such as black frames and confused voices, or he depicted the student leaders on a scratched up visual track. Yet in both those films the sound track described the 68 events as progressive. In general Godard and Gorin could draw no single conclusion from the events. *TOUT VA BIEN* in 1972 could only conclude that the petite bourgeoisie had to think historically and evaluate what they had lost and what strengths they had gained (mostly the former) since 68.

If *TOUT VA BIEN* had as its subject how petit bourgeois intellectuals could come to terms with May 68 and their lives' fragmentation, they would have to do that by educating themselves about history, outside any institutional structure. Other of Godard and Gorin's post-68 films dealt even more explicitly with this topic of political education outside the university, usually drawing on the texts of Mao Tse-Tung. As in *LA CHINOISE* the protagonist in *LUTTES EN ITALIE* discovered that her professor's voice equaled the state's voice within the university. The

professor would tell students which ideas were true or false, but he would not discuss where those ideas came from, how social practice generated those ideas, or how ideas had a class nature. Yet the film also concluded that it would represent a mechanistic and spontaneous solution for the student to think she could join the working class for the sake of revolutionary agitation by quitting school and going to work in a factory. Politically she should carry on her struggles where she was at, at the university.

PRAVDA examined false consciousness in Czechoslovakia; if the state's goal were to raise the working class to the level of bourgeois intellectual life, then workers would never challenge bourgeois values of individuality and egoism. In VENT D'EST the revisionist schoolteacher gave the Third World student Louis Althusser's *Lire Capital (How to Read "Capital")* instead of guns. LE GAI SAVOIR, VENT D'EST and LUTTES EN ITALIE dealt totally with radical political education, which theme then represented films' own didactic function. In LE GAI SAVOIR the protagonists wanted to find a way of educating themselves, especially about the media. They proposed to combine two strategies, *method* and *sentiment*. Their plan reflected Godard's interest in many New Left issues, such as the relation between emotional repression (Herbert Marcuse's one-dimensionality) and advanced capitalist modes of social organization. In this film Godard had the characters announce what he himself would do over the next four years. Dissolve the sounds and images that compose a film and go back to zero in terms of film form, so as to find reference points that would lead to understanding the rules for making a "revolutionary" film.

PRAVDA contained on the sound track many references to Mao's writings, especially the essay *On Practice*. As Godard said, PRAVDA really depicted a communist "unreality" in Czechoslovakia, for what looked like information created a deformation. The film demonstrated the ways Western ideology had swamped Czech popular democracy and how, worst of all, the workers had no control over production or the state. They functioned like machines and were denied entry into the political sphere. PRAVDA's critique, of course, gave one more French Maoist critique of Communist revisionism, where all Western Communist parties were seen as having adopted Western (ultimately, U.S.) ideology.

VENT D'EST and LUTTES EN ITALIE dealt with the whole Maoist concept of growing through political practice and criticizing one's own practice so as to effectively change society. Marxism emphasizes the importance of theory as a guide to action, for theory helps people produce knowledge about their own situation. Once people see through to the laws of the objective world and understand the play of objective contradictions in their own situation, they can then use that knowledge to change the world. But, and here Godard and Gorin agreed totally with Mao, practice comes first, for only practice provides direct contact with the world. The characters in LA CHINOISE, the voices in PRAVDA, the young woman in LUTTES EN ITALIE, even Fonda and Montand in



TOUT VA BIEN were all in some sense political activists. Godard showed the steps by which Fonda in TOUT VA BIEN came to realize what Mao stated in *On Practice*: "If you want knowledge, you must take part in the practice of changing reality." (31)

In the form of all his films from 1968 on and in the content of LE GAI SAVOIR, LUTTES EN ITALIE, PRAVDA and TOUT VA BIEN, Godard seemed to struggle for change in a way that paralleled many French Maoist intellectuals' interpretation of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. According to Mao,

"The struggle of the proletariat and the revolutionary people to change the world comprises the fulfillment of the following tasks: to change the objective world and, at the same time, their own subjective world — to change their cognitive ability and change the relations between the subjective and objective world." (32)

In these political films Godard and Gorin wanted to change our cognitive ability, and they showed us characters struggling to change theirs. The two directors wanted to change the relations between the subjective and the objective world, especially in terms of the way we received film and the media.

## IDEOLOGY

As in the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Godard and Gorin struggled against bourgeois and revisionist modes of thought. PRAVDA unmasked the attitudes the state ideological apparatus maintained in the workers. The established left's cultural policies frequently became Godard and Gorin's target. They heavily critiqued films made in Russia, Eastern Europe, and the Third World. In VENT D'EST the voice off said that an alternative cinema had to get into the revolutionary present and not be cluttered with past images and sounds. Imperialism could too easily creep back in via the camera and work against the revolution.

Like Brecht, Godard fought too easily digested or predigested modes of thought. Brecht and Godard found such modes of thought in philosophy which discussed "self-evident truths," or in narrative form which depended on a fixed view of character and elicited a predictable emotional effect. In literature and film, this kind of narrative omitted explaining the social and class context from which the characters' or authors' ideas emerged, and within which the play and film would be received.

In TOUT VA BIEN, LUTTES EN ITALIE, and LE GAI SAVOIR, Godard and Gorin examined how ideology organized practical social behavior (ideology here referring to the daily uninterrupted reproduction of productive relations in the psyche). (33) With Mao's concept of the uneven development of contradictions, Godard and other Maoists had a theoretical vehicle with which to appreciate women's liberation and Third World nationalist movements as progressive on their own terms.

In his earlier films Godard had considered the relation between women's economic and social oppression and women's subjective oppression; in WEEKEND he took up this same theme for Blacks and Arabs. Both women's movement writers and anti-colonial writers such as Frantz Fanon have discussed the psychological "imperialism" absorbed by oppressed peoples, i.e., the concept of the colonized mind. Godard and Gorin accepted this evaluation of oppressed people's subjective behavior as well as other critiques by the New Left of the political implications of daily life. In all their films from 1968 on, they sought to analyze the political consequences of seemingly "natural" perceptions and of one's unexamined daily conduct.

In 1969 Godard and Gorin structured a whole film around examining ideology in everyday life. They drew on the ideas of Louis Althusser as they presented as a protagonist in LUTTES EN ITALIE a young woman activist who wanted to understand the structural conditions of her life. She first defined ideology as the necessarily imaginary relation between herself and the real conditions of her existence. The film introduced the various areas of her life — militant activity selling a radical newspaper, family life, an afternoon with a lover, shopping, going to class — in flat emblematic images. The protagonist could evaluate these instances of her life only as isolated phenomena. Visually those instances were joined together by black sections in the film. Slowly the woman, Paola, began to understand that ideology functions by such regions, which seem more or less autonomous but are connected. As the voice over said, her life was cut up into rubrics. In learning to connect these areas of her life, she learned that ideology always expressed itself through a material ideological apparatus, which organized its material practices according to a practical ritual (going to school, falling in love, going shopping, watching television, etc.).

Godard and Gorin had the protagonist learn how her behavior in each area of her life served existing production relations, now represented visually by shots of factory work which replaced the black spaces. She understood the underlying governing social phenomena that bourgeois ideology hides. She concluded that as a militant she would attack the determining region of bourgeois ideology, the legal and political sphere. She understood that such activity would have repercussions in different ways in all other areas of her life.

LUTTES EN ITALIE presented an oversimplified view of Althusser's concepts of ideology. It certainly could be challenged as a political statement. However, there could be no response to the film at all except on political terms. The visual organization of the film derived from Godard and Gorin's effort to find cinematic equivalents for coming to understand one's position in ideology. The content was about ideology and nothing else. The film not only invited but demanded a political interpretation.

In a long article on the film, Gerard Leblanc criticized the film for not analyzing the objective contradictions of a young militant's life in either

France or Italy, although ostensibly Paola belonged to the group Lotta Continua. (34) The contradictions presented in the film did not reflect the complexity or historical context of real social conditions in Italy and France in the late 1960s. In addition, the film did not analyze ideology as a force for material transformation but only as an object of knowledge. The film depicted ideological apparatuses as a system of imaginary representations. Since the film showed Paola proceeding to transform herself subjectively by rethinking her daily life and political practice, it implied that understanding ideological mechanisms and transforming one's daily life from a bourgeois to a revolutionary one was a task one could achieve by oneself rather than by collective activity within a political organization. In political terms the film allowed for the subjective transformation of a bourgeoisie militant but gave no indication how France and Italy in 1969 might be transformed.

## CINEMA AND IDEOLOGY

In their last joint work together, Godard and Gorin made *LETTER TO JANE* to contribute to an understanding of the cinema and ideology. In Althusser's sense, they treated film here as an ideological process embedded in a specific ideological apparatus which governs the rituals that define cinematic practice. The film was made out of a few slides and Godard and Gorin's voice-over commentary analyzing these slides. Godard and Gorin discussed journalism, the star system, and the dependence of Third World countries such as North Vietnam on our press and our radical stars — in this case on Jane Fonda. They talked about the rituals and codes of a certain kind of cinematic expression of helpless dismay while facing immense social suffering. They discussed the implications of photojournalistic form. They used the topic of Fonda's militant practice as a round-about way of rephrasing the question, "What is the role of the intellectual in the revolution?" — the statement of which question they found inadequate because of the way that the mass media diffuse, control, and deform information.

Primarily in *LETTER TO JANE* they demonstrated the function of bourgeois photojournalism by analyzing in detail a photo of Jane Fonda taken in North Vietnam. It had appeared in *L'Express* with the caption, "Jane Fonda interrogant des habitants de Hanoi sur les bombardements americains" (Jane Fonda questioning Hanoi residents about U.S. bombings). The film's commentary stated that the examination of this news photo was a scientific experiment, first to see its form and then to see the photo as a "social nerve cell." In this film, as in *PRAVDA*, the sound track cited the three kinds of social practice that Mao said could generate correct ideas — the struggle for production, the class struggle, and scientific experimentation. (37)

In discussing the photo as a "social nerve cell," Godard and Gorin noted that the caption was written by *L'Express* writers untruthfully (Fonda was listening and not questioning) without any contact with the North Vietnamese. That is, *L'Express* journalists did not contact those who probably controlled the process of producing the photo but who did not

control its distribution (and thus were limited in completing the act of completing the act of communication they planned). Fonda was photographed by journalist Joseph Kraft in her role as a star, as a certain kind of ideological merchandise. Godard and Gorin said that if *L'Express* were able to lie in the photo's caption, it was because the picture made that possible: "*L'Express* is able to avoid saying, 'What peace?' — leaving this up to the picture alone." (38)

The directors concluded that Fonda was being used in the photo solely as a star. She stood in the foreground with a look on her face which conveyed a tragic sense of pity, and the Vietnamese were seen only out of focus or with back turned. Godard and Gorin criticized her tragic look in the way that Althusser critiqued the mirror-like specular aspect of ideology, which positioned people in seemingly natural and inevitable social roles. Such a photograph, according to the film's sound track,

“imposes silence as it speaks... says nothing more than how much it knows, ... Film equals the editing of 'I see.' ... This expression says I think therefore I am. This expression that says it knows a lot about things, that says no more and no less, is an expression that doesn't help one to see more clearly into one's personal problems; to see how Vietnam can shed some light on them, for example...” (39)

The voice-off also asserted elliptically at this point that such an expression illustrated a look that came into sound film with the New Deal, but the economic connections to film form here were not made explicit.

One of Godard and Gorin's serious conceptual shortcomings in *LETTER TO JANE* was that they did not analyze the relation between the contradictions they pointed out in Fonda's role as a militant and the contradictory or mutually reinforcing ways the media have been used by different political groups and economic interests. North Vietnam, Hollywood, *L'Express*, and Godard and Gorin in both *TOUT VA BIEN* and *LETTER TO JANE* all had different reasons for using Fonda as a star. They all used her and her image in the context of different political and economic situations. Her image was world-known and diffused by a technical apparatus that extended throughout the world. But it had been used in very different ways, from the sex-star of *BARBARELLA* to information rallies about political prisoners in South Vietnam. Fonda played on contradictions, as they did. In this case, she did so to raise political support. Godard and Gorin criticized Fonda because she did not evaluate or act out of the contradictions in her own practice and situation as an actress. They wanted her to question how she might become a militant Hollywood actress, creating a new politicized approach or style. They principally raised an aesthetic demand. They did not consider, at least publicly, how they had just "used" her in *TOUT VA BIEN*. For example, during the filming of that film, it was known that the politically Left actors Fonda and Montand wanted to have but were given very little collective input into the style and content of the film.

Godard and Gorin did not examine their own role in the constellation of ideological contradictions that made up the "moment" of either TOUT VA BIEN or LETTER TO JANE.

I raise this issue of Godard and Gorin's own stance because they had a relation to their own practice that was far more ambiguous and unarticulated than that analysis of Fonda's practice which they attempted to make within LETTER TO JANE. They "made political films politically" after 1968, striving for a correct and revolutionary film form. They considered French militants their intended audience. However, by the time they made LETTER TO JANE to take on tour, they knew they could make more money with that filmed slideshow with foreign university students, particularly U.S. ones, than in France. TOUT VA BIEN was made, as was discussed in the opening shots of the film itself, with big studio money and stars (a precondition for getting the money). Yet when Godard and Gorin summarized the functioning of the cinematic ideological apparatus, they could not discuss the contradictions in their own practice nor analyze their own relation to production and consumption. They too received money as "stars." They could choose whether to film in 16mm, wide screen Cinemascope, or a slideshow format. They did not discuss the contradictions involved in each of these decisions. In LETTER TO JANE they also did not discuss the commercial failure of TOUT VA BIEN nor the political effect of its being seen primarily in 16mm distribution channels in the United States and England. And although they criticized Fonda for a kind of schizophrenia in that she could make a Hollywood film like KLUTE and also agitate on behalf of North Vietnam, they themselves did not consider the political implications of the fact that U.S., French, British, and Italian university students and film intellectuals have been primary receivers of their most political films. In his film and television work since 1972, Godard has demonstrated that such ambiguity has continued to permeate his work — the Brechtian strain being seen in NUMERO DEUX and his television work, and the politically weak attempt at commercial success evidenced in SAUVE QUI PEUT LA VIE.

## Notes

[1.](#) I have written extensively on the unique cinematic tactics Godard developed in this period. See my "Critical Survey of Godard's Oeuvre" as well as descriptions of individual films in *Jean-Luc Godard: A Guide to References and Resources* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1979); "TOUT VA BIEN and COUP POUR COUP: Radical French Film in Context," *Cineaste*, 5:3 (Summer, 1972); "Godard and Gorin's WIND FROM THE EAST: Looking at a Film Politically," JUMP CUT, No. 4 (Nov.-Dec., 1974); "The Films of Jean-Luc Godard and Their Use of Brechtian Dramatic Theory," Ph.D. Dissertation, Indiana University, 1976.

[2.](#) Interview with Godard, conducted by myself, Champaign, Illinois, April 4, 1973.

[3.](#) Annie Goldman, "Jean-Luc Godard: Un Nouveau Réalisme," *N.R.F.*, 14:165 (Sept. 1, 1966), 564.

4. Godard, interview with Pierre Daix, "Jean Luc Godard: Ce que j'ai à dire," *Les Lettres françaises*, No. 128 (April 21-27, 1966), p. 17.
5. Ibid.
6. Godard, interview, with Yvonne Baby, "Jean-Luc Godard: Pour mieux écouter les autres," *Le Monde*, April 27, 1972, p. 17.
7. Godard, interview with Sylvain Regard, "La Vie moderne," in *Nouvel Obaervateur*, 100 (Oct. 12-18, 1966), 54. Translation mine.
8. Godard, LA CHINOISE (screenplay), *L'Avant Scène du cinéma*, No. 114 (May 1971), p. 20. Translation mine.
9. Ibid., p. 20. Mao Tse-Tung, "On Contradiction," *Selected Readings from the Work of Mao Tse-Tung*. (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1971), pp. 85-133. Brecht shared Godard's enthusiasm for this theoretical text. In 1955 Brecht wrote that it was the book that had made the strongest impression on him the year before.
10. Godard, interview with Michael Cournot, "Quelques évidentes incertitudes," *Revue d'esthétique*, N.S. 20:2-3 (Winter '67), 122.
11. Jean-Luc Godard, Alexandre Astruc, Jean Renoir, Claude Chabrol, Jacques Rivette, "Conference de presse (Feb. 16, 1968): L'Affaire Langlois," *Cahiers du cinéma*, No. 199 (March 1968), pp. 34-41.
12. An excellent review of French theoretical writings coming out of May 68 is Jane Elisabeth Decker's "A Study in Revolutionary Theory: The French Student-Worker Revolt of May, 1968," Ph.D. Dissertation, Washington University, 1971.
13. Gorin, interview with Lesage, Paris, July 18, 1972; and Godard and Gorin, interview with Kent Carroll, *Focus on Godard*, ed. Royal Brown (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1972).
14. For a further discussion of the composition of the student *groupuscules* and the politics of spontaneity, see Decker, pp. 182-209, 234-37. See also Robert Estivals, "De l'avant-garde esthétique à la révolution de mai," *Communications*, No. 12 (1968), pp. 84-107. In all of the student groups, even though a primacy was placed on direct action and fighting on the barricades, there was also a consensus that the working class must make the revolution. The general strike was possible because working class militancy was at a high level — and has continued so, with a history of wildcat strikes since 1968. Gorin had rejected the Maoist groups per se by May 1968, and his description to me of the history of the Maoist groups indicates some of the complexities surrounding *spontanéisme* as a political issue in the left in France:

“Most of the Maoist movement was unable to see what was happening in 68. They were active in 68 in the factories and refused to deal with the student movement as petit



bourgeois. And in the factories, they tried not to appear as leftist but as "responsible people," which led them to fake much of the revisionist slogans and try to adapt them in a Maoist way (such as "keeping the workers inside the factories," etc.). It was a reactionary way to see the events, and they were a reactionary force. I mean, the Maoist movement refused to fight on the barricades even if individually most of the [or their, tape unclear] people had done it. In 1968, the movement struck back in spontaneism and ultra-leftism. It was also effective in a certain way that it left a real fighting spirit inside some of the elements of the working class. Most of the leftist movement retired to get organized in a semi-legal way. For three years, the Maoists' actions have been very spontaneistic and very scattered. People come into a factory just like that where there's a coup, just getting up and trying to organize, and exposing people to repression, and so on. It's been a real mess." (July 1972)

[15.](#) Godard, interview, *Kino-Praxis* (1968). This was a film broadside published in Berkeley by Jack Flash, pseud. for Bertrand Augst.

[16.](#) Patrick Kessel, *La Mouvement "Maoïste" en France 1: Textes at documents, 1963-1968* (Paris: Oct. 18, 1972). See pp. 27-67 for a chronology of events from 1952 to 1964, including the Sino-Soviet split in 1962-63, that led to the splits from the PCF. Brochure cited, pp. 151-52. Translation mine.

[17.](#) Godard said that he had interviewed some of the staff of *Cahiers marxistes-léinistes* in preparation for LA CHINOISE.

[18.](#) Kessel, p. 208. Translation mine.

[19.](#) Gorin, interview with Lesage, July 18, 1972.

[20.](#) Gorin, interview with Martin Walsh, *Take One*, 5:1 (Feb. 1976), 17.

[21.](#) Gérard Leblanc, "Sur trois films du Groupe Dziga Vertov," *VH 101*, No. 6 (1972), p. 26.

[22.](#) Tom Luddy indicated that Godard edited both films (May 14, 1975, phone conversation with Lesage). Luddy also said Raphael Soren and Ned Burgess were unofficially part of the Dziga Vertov Group then, and that the group's function was primarily to make suggestions for scripts.

[23.](#) Gorin interview, July 18, 1972.

[24.](#) Mao Tse-Tung, "Talks at the Yen-an Forum on Literature and Art," *Selected Readings*, p. 276.

[25.](#) *WIND FROM THE EAST and WEEKEND*, Nicholas Fry, ed., Marianne Sinclair and Danielle Adkinson, trans. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), p. 125.

[26.](#) Godard, interview with Kent E. Carroll, *Evergreen Review*, 14:83 (Oct. 1970).

[27.](#) French edition available to Godard was Bertolt Brecht, *Me-Ti: Livre des retournements*, ed. Uwe Johnson, tr. Bernard Lotholary (Paris: L'Arche, 1968). Translated from the German, Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke, XII*, introduction Klaus Völker, series ed. Elisabeth Hauptmann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967). Translations are mine.

[28.](#) PRAVDA, text of voice-over commentary, *Cahiers du cinéma*, No. 240 (July-Aug. 1972).

[29.](#) Gorin interview with Martin Evan, *Le Monde*, April 27, 1972, p. 17.

[30.](#) Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon, 1964). Guy Debord, *La Société du Spectacle* (Paris: Buchet-Castel, 1967), tr. and rpt. in *Radical America* (entire issue), 5:5 (1970).

[31.](#) Mao Tse-Tung, "On Practice," *Selected Readings*, p. 41.

[32.](#) *Ibid.*

[33.](#) Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes toward an Investigation)," *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, tr. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp 127-186. Louis Althusser's "I.S.A." essay is dated Jan.-April 1969, but did not appear until 1970 in *La Pensée*. Gorin, who structured *LUTTES EN ITALIE*, came to know these concepts through Althusser's lectures. The film follows Althusser's ideas almost exactly and was made in 1969.

[34.](#) Gérard Leblanc, "Lutte idéologique en *LUTTES EN ITALIE*," *VH 101*, No. 9 (Autumn 1972), p. 86.

[37.](#) Mao Tse-Tung, "Where Do Correct Ideas Come From?" *Selected Readings*, p. 502.

[38.](#) Godard and Gorin, "Excerpts from the Transcript of Godard and Gorin's LETTER TO JANE," *Women and Film*, 1:3-4 (1973), 51.

[39.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 49.



# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Counter cinema bibliography from JUMP CUT

by Julia Lesage

from *Jump Cut*, no. 28, April 1983, p. 53

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Alan Lovell's and Julia Lesage's articles on Godard in this issue continue and extend JUMP CUT's discussion of Godard and radical counter-cinema.

No. 1 (May-June 1974)

- "MEMORIES OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT" by Julia Lesage
- "WANDA and MARILYN TIMES FIVE: Seeing through Cinema-Verité" by Chuck Kleinhans

No. 2 (July-August 1974)

- "LUCIA" by Peter Biskind

No. 3 (September-October 1974)

- "Interview with Jean-Pierre Gorin" by Christian Braad Thomson.
- No. 4 (November-December 1974)
- "Political Formations in the Cinema of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet" by Martin Walsh
  - "From Tear-Jerkers to Thought-Provokers: Types of Audience Response" by Chuck Kleinhans

"WIND FROM THE EAST" by Julia Lesage

- "Brecht Issue of Screen" reviewed by Julia Lesage.

No. 5 (January-February 1975)

- "SPEAKING DIRECTLY: SOME AMERICAN NOTES" by Julia Lesage
- "Afterimages — Notes from Practice" by John Jost
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- "Critical Dialogue on WOMAN OF THE GANGES" by John Hess

and William Van Wert

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- "Reading and Thinking about the Avant-garde" by Chuck Kleinhans

No. 7 (May-July 1975)

- "LE GAI SAVOIR" by James Monaco
- "LE GAI SAVOIR" by Ruth Perlmutter
- "Film as a Subversive Art (Amos Vogel)" reviewed by Chuck Kleinhans

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- "GREASER'S PALACE" by Chuck Kleinhans
- "Women's Films at Knokke" by Verina Glaessner

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- "NUMÉRO DEUX" by Reynold Humphries
- "Psychoanalysis and Film — An Exchange" by Ben Brewster, Stephen Heath, Cohn MacCabe, and Chuck Kleinhans
- "WOMEN'S HAPPY TIME COMMUNE" by E. Ann Kaplan

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- "MILESTONES" by Michelle Citron, Chuck Kleinhans, and Julia Lesage
- "Critical Responses to MILESTONES" by Bill Horrigan
- "Interview with Robert Kramer and John Douglas on MILESTONES" by G. Roy Levin
- "THE MERCHANT OF FOUR SEASONS" by Barbara Leaming
- "Cinema Novo and the Pitfalls of Cultural Nationalism" by Hans Proppe and Susan Tarr
- "Noel Burch's Film Theory" by Martin Walsh
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- "UNDERGROUND" by Thomas Waugh
- Articles on New Film Theory by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, Judith Mayne, Julia Lesage, and E. Ann Kaplan
- "THE NIGHTCLEANERS" by Claire Johnston
- "MOSES AND AARON" by Martin Walsh
- "Interview with Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet" by Joel Rogers

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- "JONAH WHO WILL BE 25 IN THE YEAR 2,000" by Robert Stam, with response by Linda Greene, John Hess, and Robin Lakes
- "Brecht vs. Pabst in THE THREEPENNY OPERA" by Jan-Christopher Horak
- "EFFI BRIEST" by Renny Harrigan

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- "FOX AND HIS FRIENDS" by Andrew Britton
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- "SIX FOIS DEUX" by Jean Collet (trans. Dana Polan)
- "Epic Theater and the Principles of Counter-Cinema" by Alan Lovell
- Godard and Gorin 's Left Politics. 1967-72

### Critical dialogue Sexual politics

by Cathy Schwichtenberg

from *Jump Cut*, no. 28, April 1983, p. 58

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After reading Maureen Turim's book review of Patricia Erens's feminist film anthology *Sexual Stratagems* (JUMP CUT, No. 27), I was prompted to reflect on issues related to pedagogy and feminist film studies. Crucially, what is at stake in feminist film studies is the politicization of one's students. At the level of praxis, the teacher must convince her students that they have a stake in feminism and that movies are not simply entertainment but cultural/ideological artifacts, in which representations inform the ways that the students go about constructing their social reality.

Many students may be skeptical or resistant to even the most basic assumptions that feminism and the way in which women are represented in film significantly affect them outside of academia. Other students may already be convinced of the relevance of feminist studies to their lives. They wish to understand how ideology, specifically in relation to film, informs the textual mechanisms that determine certain representations of women. Still other students may already know these things and simply need a historical background to situate the evolution of feminist film studies. Or they may need to be referred to articles that exhibit diverse methodologies brought to bear on texts under the rubric of feminism. Finally, some students who have been marginally interested in either feminist studies or film or both may desire a sense of community with others who share their interests. These students probably look upon the classroom situation as a pretext to develop friendships.

Thus a course in feminist film studies, especially an introductory level course, must somehow satisfy a number of diverse needs and curiosities that the students bring to the course. With such widespread desires and expectations, the teacher's task is certainly not an easy one — is she to satisfy desires one or two or all of the above? Clearly, she would want to satisfy the needs of all of her students. This brings us to the sticky problem of "how." As Turim rightly points out, there are too few

feminism and film anthologies. Those that are available require annotation as a result of the obvious time lags in publication and hence the "datedness" of the material.

But, I don't believe, as I think Turim does, that teachers of feminism and film are confronted with an either/or proposition. The choice between an anthology which presents a diverse (albeit scattered) historical overview or more methodologically rigorous theoretical articles does not exist. Obviously both types of feminist scholarship should be studied, analyzed, and critiqued by students. Maybe this could be done chronologically, so that students have a sense of evolving and developing lines of thought around a central issue or even two opposing views on an issue. It is not enough to indicate that the earlier popular notion of "images of women" has shifted to the very different process notion of "imaging," but rather why, how, when, and what is at stake as the result of such a shift (what is lost and what gained). Other large issues may involve the differences between U.S. feminism and Continental feminism or the political/critical/theoretical implications of a cross-fertilization of the two currents.

While feminist anthologies certainly have their shortcomings, the more theoretical works that Turim points to are equally limited. They too are bound by history and are not definitive; probably a few years from now those works will also require annotation. Any "model" piece of scholarly writing presented to students should be used as an example and critiqued by students. And the methodology perhaps could be imitated and used as a springboard for the students' own formulations.

Certainly, there is no one right way to approach teaching feminism and film. Luckily, the work in this area has yet to be canonized, as has the work in the majority of courses taught in the academy. Significantly, this means that feminism and film is an area still open to methodological and political debate. One of the places for political intervention triggered by debate lies within the academy, which provides a time and place where issues that seriously affect how people perceive the world can be aired, argued, and discussed. This space for political intervention must be left open to provide students with the opportunity to develop their own unique formulations on issues and to refute and challenge previous scholarship in the field.

Feminist film studies is a unique area in that it not only relates to students' lived experiences, but it also provides them with a space for original thought that is all too often stifled in the more canonized disciplines, which remain entrenched in tradition. This space which feminism and film provide should be left open for debate, challenges, new methodologies. We will always be engaged in the process of annotating and amending articles or anthologies, and with any luck our students will help us do it.

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Critical dialogue Tap dancing

by John Fell

from *Jump Cut*, no. 28, April 1983, p. 58

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Marcia Biederman's appreciation of NO MAPS ON MY TAPS (George Nierenberg, 1978) in JUMP CUT, No. 26, is very welcome, and perhaps a few additions may be useful to readers. While often commercially deployed (battles of the bands at the Savoy Ballroom), the notion of challenge rests deep in traditions of jazz and jazz dance. Artistic combat exists quite for its own sake but equally a way to learn and to test progress against the best. Young tenor saxes used to meet the great Coleman Hawkins on his home ground (New York) or wherever he toured with the Fletcher Henderson band. Sandman Sims touches on the matter when he speaks of Chuck Green, "He was my biggest challenge. I could always measure my dancing by his dancing." Later, "To challenge dance was to learn how to dance."

Many great tap dancers were/are singers, too, John Bubbles, Bill Robinson, and Bunny Briggs among them. Singing was part of the stage turn, and performers carried arrangements of their specialty numbers from job to job. Briggs appeared both as singer and dancer with Charlie Barnet's band. He can be seen in one of the Universal band shorts of the late forties, significantly dressed as a Western Union messenger. Bill Robinson's Broadway career was enhanced in BLACKBIRDS OF 1928 with "Doin' the New Lowdown," the Dorothy Fields-Jimmy McHugh song which introduces Lionel Hampton's band in NO MAPS ON MY TAPS.

In the film, each accompaniment enlists generations of stage and jazz overtones, from "Sweet Georgia Brown," written by the vastly underrated black composer Maceo Pinkard, to Juan Tizol's "Caravan" and Billy Strayhorn's "Take the A Train" at Small's Paradise, itself once an outpost for black entertainers, run by whites for a white clientele, like the Cotton Club.

While the respective merits of Bill Robinson and John Bubbles are yet argued, they also reflect-stylistic changes: Robinson high on his toes,

Bubbles new with heavy-on-the-heel steps. Buck Washington and Bubbles, by the way, were also immensely popular. They (or Bubbles alone) played the Palace, the Orpheum circuit, Loew's, the Music Hall, London's Palladium, the Ziegfield Follies, and George White's Scandals.

NO MAPS ON MY TAPS doesn't pretend to be a history of the art, but conspicuous by their absence even in reference are figures like Honi Coles and the Nicholas Brothers. Jazz and jazz dance are really closely integrated. Coles, himself now seventy, argues that innovations in jazz percussion, the bass drum bombs of bop drumming, for instance, started with dancers long before Parker, Gillespie, and Monk's experimentations.

Certainly Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly capitalized on black traditions of jazz dance, but how far they literally drew on black dancers' material is open to dispute. Even "Bojangles of Harlem," Astaire's tribute to Robinson in SWINGTIME (George Stevens, 1936), is noteworthy for its absence of Robinson routines. In tribute, black dancers are much more disposed to slip in and out of a Bojangles swagger like the inturned hand-on-the-hip that's documented in Nierenberg's film by a little clip from HORRAY FOR LOVE (Walter Lang, 1936).

Readers may be interested in another film, TAPDANCIN' (1980), produced and directed by Christian Blackwood. It features John Bubbles, Honi Coles, and the Nicholas Brothers. Coles notes he might have gone further but for racism and turns to the camera to say, "I might not have even been a dancer if I'd been white." For one who loves jazz music and dance, the remark poses a moment of terrible reflection. I like to think that Chuck Green's song-snippet "There's no maps on my taps ..." somehow describes a man so skilled that artificial boundaries can't limit him. But of course Green's years in a mental institution belie that little fantasy.



### *The Celluloid Closet* Looking for what isn't there

by Martha Fleming

from *Jump Cut*, no. 28, April 1983, pp. 59-61

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*The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*. Vito Russo. New York: Harper and Row, 1981. 276 pp., illustrated. Index.

Some sixty-odd pages into his book, Vito Russo comments on Leontine Sagan's classic *MÄDCHEN IN UNIFORM*. Here, my growing frustration with his book crystallized into an understanding of what was wrong with it. *MÄDCHEN*, made in pre-war Weimar Germany, concerns the tortured relation between a student and her female teacher at a private school for the daughters of Prussian army officers. Of it, Russo says:

“One of the few films to have an inherently gay sensibility [Russo has trouble using the word ‘lesbian,’ even in places where anything else is simply wrong], it is also one of the few to be written, produced, and directed by women. Thus the film shows an understanding — missing from most films that touch on lesbian feelings — of the dynamic of women relating to women on their own terms (p. 56).”

Is a film inherently lesbian because lesbians make it? More generally, can women in our society relate to women "on their own terms"? The filmmakers in their collaboration may have partially achieved such a relation, but they did not necessarily intend to portray a "dynamic of women relating to women on their own terms" in the film. Quite the opposite, given that the student in the film suffers a breakdown at the hands of the school principal, herself a woman and equally subject to patriarchy's ideological exigencies. Nor did the filmmakers themselves entirely escape that grasp. As Russo himself points out, they made the film with two endings, one in which the student hurls herself to her death in a stairwell and another in which her friends — all more or less similarly enchanted by their teacher — save her. [\(1\)](#)

Perhaps Russo wishes to make up for his fundamentally gay male

analysis by writing "positively" about the few lesbian-made films he discusses. He makes the briefest of references to Dorothy Arzner, only to dismiss her.

“An obviously lesbian director like Dorothy Arzner got away with her lifestyle because she was officially closeted and because ‘it made her one of the boys.’ But a man who, like [James] Whale, openly admitted his love relationship with another man, did not stand a chance” (p. 50).

But Russo romanticizes relationships between women in *MÄDCHEN* so much that he seems to turn a regimental girls' school into an amazon utopia. This is not enough to excuse the fact that Russo has ignored a lesbian perspective in the fundamentals of his analysis. This lack cripples the whole book, not just scarring the pages which refer to lesbians.

To start with, saying gay and intending to include lesbians under the umbrella roughly parallels saying mankind and presuming to include women. It's surprising behavior from someone with Russo's credentials in the gay and lesbian liberation movement — credentials that make straights and not-yet-politicized gays and lesbians listen to him as if he knows the whole score. Without lesbian feminism and the women's movement's ever-changing tactics in general, the gay and lesbian liberation movement would not even have gained the meager ground which we are all trying desperately to keep dyked up against the submerging waters of an ever-mounting right. The ground women gain for themselves also means ground gained for homosexuals, no matter what the antagonisms or hostility between the two groups may be at any given moment.

On another level, Russo confuses filmmakers and their films in an equally alarming way. Confusing film life and real life, he pulls us even further back than the antiquated camera obscura model into the stone age of ideological theory where art imitates or "reflects" life. In just the two-page introduction and the first three pages of Chapter One, variants on the word "reflection" appear five times. (2) The problematic attitude isn't confined to the use of certain words:

“America's ostentatious fascination with the difference between masculine and feminine behavior and society's absolute terror of queerness, especially in men, continued to be served by the requisite yardstick sissy” (p. 66).

Here he combines sexism with a rather simplistic notion of the relation of "life" to "art." Certainly the total lack of lesbians in feature fiction film indicates that lesbians are much more socially terrifying than gay men. Representations of relations between homosexual men can include, however maliciously and misrepresentationally, questions of patriarchal power and male supremacy. Such treatments of these questions are less culturally challenging than depicting the radicality of a member of society attempting to define herself completely outside of its central

institutions.

Even if the relation were so blissfully simple, MÄDCHEN would never have accurately "reflected" the lives of German lesbians during the Nazis' rise to power as merely the antiauthoritarian metaphor which Russo misleadingly types it as:

"MÄDCHEN IN UNIFORM attacked conformity and tyranny over peoples' minds and emotions, using lesbianism as a means of rebelling against authoritarianism just as Lillian Hellman used it in THE CHILDREN'S HOUR to attack the use of powerful lies as weapons" (p. 66).

Given lesbianism's track record as an effective "means of rebelling," I can't understand why anyone would "use" it. But to consider its use in these two films, since lesbianism inherently challenges the status quo, "authoritarianism" and "lying" are narrative elements which might represent that status quo and the way it perpetuates itself. If anything, authoritarianism and lying are used by the filmmakers to evidence the society homosexuals are up against.

Russo's book is about the mainstream Hollywood cinema, in which gays and lesbians have been used and from which our real lives have been excluded. Chapter One lists early, ostensibly preconscious representations of homosexuals in U.S. film. It's called, "Who's a Sissy? Homosexuality According to Tinseltown." Chapter Two ("The Way We Weren't — The Invisible Years") provides a litany of what the U.S. censor boards excerpted in the thirties, forties, and fifties which might have indicated homosexual activity. Chapter Three ("Frightening the Horses — Out of the Closets and Into the Shadows") enumerates how filmmakers themselves qualified and censored gay and lesbian content after the lifting of the bureaucratic tip of a much more institutionalized censorship iceberg. Chapter Four ("Struggle — Fear and Loathing in Gay Hollywood") seems to include whatever was left of the seventies in the card index that Russo hadn't already scantily embellished in the earlier chapters. The book ends with startlingly uninformed praise for major U.S. television networks' approach to homosexuality.

We cannot approach self-definition within the black hole of the Hollywood institution, which makes homosexuals impossibly other. And as feminist film critics have pointed out over the past several years, the film apparatus — with its physical, social, economic, and narrative trappings — may not be able to depict women's physical body and actual lives. In a different way, such limitations in the cinematic institution may affect homosexual men and lesbians as well.

Loving members of our own sex, we are socially defined as homosexual by patriarchal capitalist society's oppressive interests. In capitalism, sexuality has become an organizational tool for social regulation. As Jeffrey Weeks outlines it:

"A major way in which sexuality is regulated is through the

process of categorisation and the imposition of a grid of definition upon the various possibilities of the body and the various forms of expression that "sex" can take. This in turn should direct our attention to the various institutions and social practices which perform this role of organisation, regulation, categorisation: various forms of the family, but also legal regulation, medical practices, psychiatric institutions and so on, all of which can be seen as products of the capitalist organisation of society." (3)

As we are defined, among other things, we are charged with delineating heterosexuality in relief. As a category our presence asserts the negative, which safeguards heterosexuality and heterosexual privilege. This is further problematized by the relative invisibility of gays and lesbians. Russo says at the end of his introduction, "We have co-operated for a very long time in the maintenance of our own invisibility. And now the party's over" (p. xii). But the invisible years referred to in Chapter Two's title are far from over, either on the screen or in the street.

We don't have "distinguishing characteristics." We aren't all one color. Or race. Or nationality. Or age group. Or language group. Or religion. Or class. So we can never know, any more than our opponents, just what constitutes our numbers and our community. We have a highly manipulable image which the "interested" tailor to suit their needs. But what if the tables were turned and we began to define ourselves in the ways in which we become visible? This is one of the central tenets of the gay and lesbian liberation movement. The movement provides support for homos coming out, who then in their visible presence add to our understanding of what it means to be homosexual at this historical juncture.

But whatever else we are, as gays and lesbians we are only visible when we make the choice to say we are — verbally or by consorting with others of our kind in homo-identified places like bars or demonstrations or through public sex or dressing funny. This choice to cross the line into some level of visibility is perhaps the only "choice" that we have. We have no choice in being or not being homos. We have no choice in how those around us react to whatever choice about visibility we make. More overt social disadvantages exist for those of us who are "out." But the problem no less damages the closeted homo who in his or her silence remains isolated from others gays and/or lesbians.

But Russo doesn't seem to understand the revolutionary potential of turning the tables on our artificially constructed responsibility to maintain heterosexual sovereignty. On page xii he says,

"There is enormous pressure to keep gay people defined solely by our sexuality, which prevents us from presenting our existence in political terms."

Politics and sexuality are far from mutually exclusive terms. Quote for quote, I retort with the words of film critic Jacquelyn Zita:

“With the politicization of lesbianism, the oppressive split between public and private spheres in a lesbian woman's life has been challenged. The lesbian body enters the public sphere under a new currency of signs which abrasively refuse misreading and invisibility.” (4)

Simply, our sexuality's existence can pose a contradiction that creates a fissure in patriarchal capitalist ideology, a fissure along which to analyze and dismantle that ideology.

From his regrettably "satellite" location of being homosexual now in the United States, Russo has taken up a disturbingly passive monitoring position for examining "our" image. He does little to challenge our exile from the production of our own meaning. Thus the book devolves into a roster of screen kisses. Spotting someone else's, Hollywood's, idea of a faggot or a dyke basically validates a misconception. That misconception may come from conscious bigotry or from the dominant ideology as it works through and with popular culture industries and products. But the relation of ideology to oppression is another question, as is the question of the relative efficacy of this presumed ideological function of Hollywood cinema. This possible further investigation is roadblocked by Russo, who keeps busy supporting Hollywood's images of homos by gleefully pointing them out to the exclusion of alternatives

He means well, and probably wanted to help people know how to look at mainstream images, but it's frustrating that he hasn't taken his own advice. Of *BOYS IN THE BAND* he says:

“But what scares Alan and the audience, what they could not come to terms with or understand, is the homosexuality of Hank and Larry, who are both just as queer as Emory yet "look" as straight as Alan. The possibility that there could be non-stereotypical homosexuals who are also staunch advocates of a working gay relationship is presented by the two lovers throughout the film. And they are the two characters most often ignored by critics and analysts of the film“ (p. 175).

And he goes on to ignore them and the implications of their characterizations, which he himself has outlined.

Politically, how can Russo disregard the problematic of film's *representational* apparatus abutted against the literal *invisibility* of most homos? Granted, a list of gay and lesbian screen images is still, unfortunately, a bold event of visibility in itself. But he is wrong to presume that merely to publish this list of the kinds of homos already on screen can bust up the "party" of hetero-ideology. And a list is certainly not information on which to propose a radical cultural practice for gay media — or rather, since Russo seems to consider gay media nonprofessional, gays in the media.

Filmmakers, and consequently their audiences, identify faggots and dykes in the film usually through the characters' extreme dress or behavior. Such cinematic codification is a sort of exaggerated version of our own limited choices for visibility. In fact, film theorists long since should have taken up the image of homos in the movies as a perfect example on which to develop a prototypic theory of ideology and representation. If society has all kinds of homes who are mostly invisible, then whatever "identifiable" image of them that exists must be perfectly ideological. The gay and lesbian community does have the sound beginnings of a body of information for such a project — The Lesbian Herstory project, Lesbians of Colour, Le Regroupement des lesbiennes de Classe Ouvrière, magazines like *The Body Politic*, *Gay Asian*, and so on. Meanwhile, what idea does the public (straight and homo) have of our lives and our numbers if they think only drag queens are gay? Russo gives extremely limited references to the lives real gays and lesbians were living through the three-fourths of this century during which were produced the screen images he calls up. On what basis are readers to make comparisons so as to evaluate the function and effect of the screen image?

The premise of Russo's book does not confront the fact that the misrepresentation of gays and lesbians in film correctly represents our social predicament. That is, we simply do not get the opportunity to present ourselves. There is an unresolved tension in the book between what Russo rightly claims is film's representation of homosexuality by sex acts alone and the lack of filmed representation of real homosexual life, of which sex is a part in a similar but obviously more socially complex way to that of heterosexuals. Claiming that gays are looking for homosexual "sensibility" and not homosexual characters, Russo also bitterly complains when "obviously" homosexual or lesbian don't overtly give evidence to this fact by sexual contact. Russo does not realize that in this apparent contradiction, the real political problem of sexuality and representation lies. For that reason, his book fails to leave anything behind it but a smoke that obscures the fire it indicates.

What is the sensibility I have that Russo thinks I want to see twinned in a Hollywood film?

“Gay sensibility is largely a product of oppression, of the necessity to hide so well for so long. It is a ghetto sensibility, born of the need to develop and use a second sight that will translate silently what the world sees and what the actuality may be. It was a gay sensibility that, for example, often enabled some lesbians and gay men to see at very early ages, even before they knew the words for what they were, something on the screen that they knew related to their lives in some way, without being able to put a finger on it” (p. 92).

I question that only "some" lesbians and gay men can tell. After all, the images go through the straight-machine of Hollywood before reaching their consumers. Whatever film may be, it is far from unintentional.

There are no accidental home images or allusions that just happen to slip in, waiting to be noticed by those of us wearing rose-colored glasses. They all have a reason and a function, not always bearing a constructive message.

Russo's romantic assumptions about intuition also ignore at their peril important film questions about audience identification, project, and desire. And the viewers' bricolage is here reduced to a kind of furtive activity of underdogs instead of one that film invites itself. Russo's zealotry in "reclaiming" imagery tells more about these questions than does his articulation of the process. Is it reclamation or stealing to talk about Katharine Hepburn's male drag in SYLVIA SCARLETT solely in terms of gay male sexuality? A surprising number of Russo's "faggot heroines" such as Elizabeth Taylor, Dietrich, Hepburn, and Garbo are women all the same, no matter what they may be "forced" to wear on screen. Russo discusses the subtly ambiguous relationship between the two male leads in GILDA. But he doesn't explore where this leaves the characterization of Gilda herself — especially in relation to women in the audience. Even straight men win out in this book before lesbians do:

“You can like or dislike the lesbian characters in MANHATTAN, and you can even argue that Allen is neurotic in his reaction to them, but it is an argument that you would win quickly. Allen is neurotic for a living and MANHATTAN is a great film” (p. 240).

Excuses, excuses.

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Throughout *The Celluloid Closet* run recurring themes that should have been dealt with much more intelligently. One is the chorus of filmed bars, the kind you drink at rather than the kind you spend time behind (though both understandably haunt the book). Russo lists appearances of gay bars in films as varied as CALL HER SAVAGE, ADVISE AND CONSENT, THE KILLING OF SISTER GEORGE, SOME OF MY BEST FRIENDS ARE ... , AND CRUISING.

Hollywood's bars depict the ghetto as a physical fact rather than the amorphous, cross-cultural culture that it is. Of course, film makes us less frightening when it can enage us in what looks like self-enforced captivity. The camera becomes a zookeeper of sorts, both privileged and protected by cinematic and social architecture. This in part derives from the representation/ invisibility problematic I described before. The bar represents the epitome of "becoming visible by consorting." (5) In ignoring the problem of the relation of representation to gay and lesbian (in)visibility, Russo himself falls into the trap of conflating bar and ghetto. Here he explains a scene in the 1932 film, CALL HER SAVAGE, in a Village gay and lesbian bar (it's a rare enough mix in real life and uncommented upon by Russo):

“The ghetto was one other world in which gays could



regularly be found on screen, both before and after the reign of the [censorship] code. The underworld life as a haven for homosexuals is a staple of music and literature, and of course this reflects the reality of most gay experience which has been limited to expression in ghettos of one sort or another from the beginning of time. The gay ghetto has often been connected to the underworld to the extent that wherever illicit activity flourishes, organized crime moves in to control it and turn a profit” (p. 43).

But not just organized crime does the controlling here. The state profits, too, though its profits are not directly financial. On the grounds that bars and baths create crime around them (classically, the crime of blackmail), many laws are created, enforced, and stretched to close these places, further marginalizing and segregating homosexuals. This puts us in even further jeopardy. When the state can make most of our social activities criminal, this assures the invisibility that makes possible the manipulation of our image and the further ideological equation of homo desire and criminality.

This constructed ambiguity of the relation between homosexuality and criminality makes films like *CRUISING*, which Russo rightfully deplores, possible and plausible. In it, "a New York City policeman, assigned to capture a psychotic killer of gay men, becomes aware of his own homosexuality and commences murdering gays" (p. 236). The film has as a premise the contagion theory par excellence. In rubbing shoulders and other things in New York leather bars, the cop not only "catches" homosexuality, but he catches crime and violence as well, twin viruses that Russo's microscope hasn't focused on. Russo's background information for *CALL HER SAVAGE* serves only to entrench the more believable — or shall we say more representable — conception of the ghetto ending at the (illegal) bar door.

But the ghetto doesn't end at the bar door, regardless of how few film homos would be recognizable outside its walls. In fact, the bar is where it really begins. As Ken Popert has written:

“It is worth remembering that the current, unexhausted wave of gay struggle began more than a decade ago in a bar. Bars and baths are to the gay movement what factories are to the labour movement: the context in which masses of people acquire a shared sense of identity and the ability to act together for the common good.”[\(6\)](#)

Even Russo's two allusions to the 1969 riots outside the Stonewall Bar neglect to mention this aspect of life in the bars. And his commentary on *CALL HER SAVAGE* does anything but naysay the image the film itself projects.

Life *behind* bars is a whole other question. There we are literally put in our place. Another dog-eared myth about homosexuality is the notion that confinement makes biologically imperative a replication and



division of sex roles. The man-the-animal approach compares gays in prison to male rats stuffed together in small cages and thereby sees them as driven to homosexuality. Russo comments that FORTUNE AND MEN'S EYES' producer Persky launched an ad campaign with lines like, "What goes on in prison is a crime." And Persky backed up his lurid directorial approach with interviews saying, "It's true. Homosexuality is still a crime in 45 out of 50 states." In this way of thinking, homosexuality is punished with isolation from the opposite sex and society in general because it is a product of isolation from same. Another brick in the architecture of homo-criminalis.

Such circular logic always provides a clue to the interests that produce this kind of ideology in order to protect themselves, here to maintain the negativity of homosexuality against which is built the positivity of heterosexuality. But Russo neither sees nor interrupts that circle. Rather, he cribs from Stuart Byron's ten-year-old review of the film to say that FORTUNE's violence stands as a lesson to gay men to confront their assimilation of heterosexual role posturing. Throwing the onus back on gay men, he closes in quoting Jack Babuscio's review of FORTUNE and G  net's CHANT D'AMOUR:

"The real prison, [G  net) seems to be saying, is within. It is the flesh that resists the pressures of homosex in the celluloid cage" (p. 200).

Both prisons, within and without, are equally real in regulating our actions. The celluloid cage is exactly that. Gay and lesbian characters are figments of a director's socialized imagination. And figments do not have the power to either act on or "resist" whatever the desires may be which an audience might project upon them.

Compare the four and a half pages of what could best be called compassionate discussion about sex and gender in FORTUNE with what Russo had to say earlier, in the book about CAGED, a 1950 film set in a women's prison:

"Because movies continue to reflect male and female role playing in both homosexual and heterosexual relations, gays can never measure up ... No matter that the havoc caused by role playing has devastated relations between men and women as well as between members of the same sex; homosexuals are Harrys and Charlies, queer imitations of the allegedly healthy norm. FORTUNE AND MEN'S EYES went out of its way to reflect onscreen this kind of slavish imitation of society's roles by changing the basis of John Herbert's play ... from a comment on sex as power to an exploitation of sex as a matter of gender identification" (p. 198).

"Mannish, aggressive, and a killer, the matron Evelyn Harper is another kind of user. The women's prison of CAGED provides the most controlled and therefore the most specific

kind of ghetto situation, one in which the sexual perversity of aliens is highly stereotyped ... In the prison of CAGED, where the pretenses of polite society are ripped away, there is an astonishing amount of lesbianism. The world of CAGED is a total underworld, corrupting and brilliantly drawn. Like the reflections of homosexuality in the cinema noir of the forties, lesbianism appears here as a product of an outlaw social structure — it comes with the territory. Evelyn Harper, the super-aggressive bull-dyke brutalizes the women while vice queen Elvira Powell (Lee Patrick) seduces them into prostitution with a sweet smile and a lecherous gaze” (p. 102).

I get it. Russo doesn't think that Byron's call for an analysis of the straightjacket of sexual roles applies to women. At least, not if they're in prison. Or rather, not if they're in a different film than that which inspired Byron's plea.

But film presents different forms of confinement, and their gradations are the gradations of class. Class is something that Russo doesn't talk much about, presumably because the films don't. But that's the best reason to do so. If the imprisoned in SCARECROW, CAGED, FORTUNE, and MIDNIGHT EXPRESS represent the criminal underclass, then the army, military schools, and private boys' and girls' boarding schools all stand for rungs up the class ladder of confinement, varying as they do in their relative voluntariness and their relation to criminality and guilt. The difference between faggots and dykes in prison and adventurous girls in school dormitories implicitly indicates that the former are depraved and the latter, by dint of affording a private education, are merely decadent.

This is not to ignore the hierarchies within these situations — who are the confined without their jailors? But although in MADCHEN IN UNIFORM the headmistress locks Manuela up, both of them are equally kept by the army officer fathers who hired the former to keep the latter a virgin till marriage. Here the film gives evidence that the jailor is not the one we see. In other films, the jailor is a scapegoat of class interests, which require prisons to give weight to the laws enforcing money's power, even in a film. Evelyn Harper and Elvira Powell are not the camp celebrations of butch and femme that Russo sees.

Another important and ill-explored theme in *The Celluloid Closet* is that of the homo murder and suicide. Such a fate is much in evidence and well documented in the book — Russo has compiled a necrology as an addendum. However, film's x-ing out of homos has a more complicated genesis than Russo's assumption that the antigay hostility of life finds wish fulfillment in film. Only those things signified in the symbolic order that film represents exist on film. Invariably in narrative features, murder or suicide and the sudden "coming out" or making visible of the homosexual coincide. Let's presume that the character seems to stand as self-determined and no longer has an admissible place or function

according to dominant ideology (as opposed to within dominant ideology, where he or she asserts the socially necessary negative). This character can literally no longer be represented and must be done away with. Perhaps we should look at this phenomenon in terms of the demands of most Hollywood films' narrative structure. Often a character will embody an "evil," of which other characters (and perhaps the audience) are implicitly guilty. To absolve this guilt, the film disposes of the personification of the evil. These are important issues for all of us to be discussing, whether or not as propositions they prove adequate for homos and film, whether or not Russo thinks they're too "academic" for a "mass" audience.

Russo skims the issue in outlining the plot of THE KILLING OF SISTER GEORGE:

"The 'killing' of Sister George is the process by which George's overt lesbianism is punished by forcing her into invisibility" (p. 172).

Between the title and action of this film, in which George does not physically die, a relation of great importance is posited between homo visibility and representation. This relation is elaborated on the plane of a metaphoric murder in which representation proves itself unequal to that which exists, exposing its ideological nature. Since this is lost on Russo, he can't very well take director Robert Aldrich's proposition and apply it to other films. Aldrich even pressed the point in THE KILLING OF SISTER GEORGE: George has the job of a character actress in a BBC-TV soap opera, where she exists (is significant) as straight until her off-camera lesbianism threatens to make real press headlines, at which point her BBC producer has her soap opera character killed off. What could be a more evident paradigm?

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Russo ends the book with a grim foreboding that television can do the trick that film apparently can't, regardless of Sister George's predicament. Here Russo even more unquestioningly accepts the medium under observation. Gay director Rosa Von Praunheim is mentioned and lesbian director Barbara Hammer is not. Russo glosses over independent gay and lesbian production and its importance. He claims instead that television is "more vulnerable" to "activist pressures than was the motion picture industry" because it is "subject to regulation by the Federal Communications Commission and to the reactions of its advertisers and vocal public opinion" (p. 221).

Given the overwhelming swing to the right, the extraordinary illogic of this statement amazes me. The Federal Communications Commission is the Reagan administration. Advertisers are the multinationals which profit most from the economic base of the nuclear family. And vocal public opinion is most strongly heard from the heavily financially backed Moral Majority. "A film may have to be a hit, but when a television show flops, there's always next week and another subject" (p.

221). Above and beyond the naiveté about the Neilsons, Russo ignores the fact that a weekly show also has more possibility to reinforce given social roles.

With the exception of the documentary about Quentin Crisp's life, *THE NAKED CIVIL SERVANT*, all the television programs commended by Russo are fiction — scripted, manipulated, charmingly complicated fiction. *THE NAKED CIVIL SERVANT* does not have a much better form. A biography of sorts, it depicts the life of a man who, as Russo admits, "makes public hay of the fact that he is not a gay militant, but he may in fact have been one of the first gay activists in his own passive way" (p. 224) (*italics mine*). Crisp is a pretty queeny character — for the producers of entertainment, visible is risible. That is why Crisp rather than, say, Walt Whitman gets the dubious honor of televised immortality.

Two documentaries which go unnoted are CBS's *GAY POWER*, *GAY POLITICS* and the state-owned Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's *SHARING THE SECRET*. (I believe that the latter is being distributed in the United States as an independent film through the gay network and the advertisements in papers like *The Advocate*.) Much like narrative films, "documentaries" are only worth making to make a point. George Smith, a Toronto graduate student at The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and the chairman of Canada's Right to Private Committee, is working on a thesis analyzing the CBS production of *GAY POWER*, *GAY POLITICS*. To quote from an excerpt which appeared in *Fuse* magazine:

"The result is a series of images and conceptions divorced from reality — a kind of life in TV land. In this case, CBS's account of the gay community fails to include, for example, Black, Asian or Hispanic gays. There are no older people. And what is of particular interest, there are no women. It is a cardboard community of white, mostly middle class, 'macho' men, where the elite spend their time at cocktail parties and the rest simply walk the streets and cruise the parks in search of sex." [\(7\)](#)

Smith later clearly indicates the way in which the program's editing and direction are virulently antigay. In the same issue of *Fuse*, John Greyson dissects *SHARING THE SECRET*. Called "Telling Secrets," Greyson's article omits one secret maybe he didn't know: one of the five men "interviewed" for the "documentary" was an actor. So much for television, Russo's great white hope.

Though it is important to know what was cut from films and what was originally scripted, which actors turned down parts or took them demanding certain cuts, *The Celluloid Closet* offers a peculiar mix of jumbled listing and half-baked analysis. It roughly follows a chronological order, but chronology does not make a history. The snippets of scenes to which Russo draws our attention have little meaning other than reiterative, since he enumerates one after another.

The snippets are used independently of the scenes which surrounded them, the other films made at the same time, the straight images created in parallel with homo images, the situation of gays and lesbians in other forms of cultural representation, and the history of the liberation movement itself. We are also talking about a century in which women got the vote and there were two world wars, all of which involved an immeasurable upheaval in sex roles, and film has had an undeniable importance in mediating that upheaval. Russo mentions most of this, but he uses none of it as a way of looking at his material. Furthermore, he never mentions pornography, which is a major portion of Hollywood's film market production. Such a discussion might have afforded a clearer connection to the economic questions which play so large a part in the creation of film images. It also would have brought into focus a discussion of voyeurism.

*The Celluloid Closet* is not a materialist feminist book about sexual representation and ideology by a sexual liberation activist. It is a book about straight images of homosexual people by a liberal gay man. I don't know why I thought Harper and Row would publish anything else. The horde of information that Russo has carefully gathered is a primary stage of research. Let's hope someone else does something with it but quick. It's too bad we don't know yet what form of representation, if any, will take place after the radical reordering that is required to free homosexuality from the kind of marginality that necessitates both this book and a better one.

## Notes

1. For an informative analysis of MÄDCHEN IN UNIFORM including important historical references, see B. Ruby Rich, "MAEDCHEN IN UNIFORM: From Repressive Tolerance to Erotic Liberation," JUMP CUT, no. 24/25. Russo's other continental diversion in the book is also to Germany, where he discusses, among others, Hirschfield's ANDERS DIE ANDEREN, released twelve years before MÄDCHEN in 1919. It is discussed mostly for its political importance since, unlike MÄDCHEN, it was not screened in North America. Hirschfield was a major and vocal opponent of homosexual oppression. Russo gives here an historical reference, but he gives a peculiarly one-sided view of the provenance and roots of a movement which has learned so much from the political activities of women.

2. These kind of statements recur throughout the book. See also quotes referring to prison films later in this text.

- "The screen work of gays as well as straights has reflected the closet mentality almost exclusively until very recently" (p. xii).
- "And when the fact of our existence became unavoidable, we were reflected, onscreen and off, as dirty secrets" (p. xii).
- "The predominantly masculine character of the earliest cinema reflected an America that saw itself as a recently conquered wilderness" (p. 5).
- "Men who were perceived to be 'like women' were simply

mamma's boys, reflections of an overabundance of female influence "(p. 6)

- "The idea of homosexuality first emerged onscreen, then, as an unseen danger, reflection of our fears about the perils of tampering with male and female roles" (p. 6).

3. Jeffrey Weeks, "Capitalism and the Organisation of Sex," in *Homosexuality: Power and Politics*, ed. Gay Left Collective. London: Allison and Busby, 1980, p. 14.

4. Jacquelyn Zita, "The Films of Barbara Hammer: Counter-Currencies of a Lesbian Iconography," JUMP CUT, no. 24/25.

5. Russo points to this when he mentions that a doctor's secretary lost her job when she was spotted in a press photo taken on the set of THE KILLING OF SISTER GEORGE. The set was a lesbian bar, the Gateways Club, and the secretary an unwitting extra.

6. Ken Popert, "Public Sexuality and Social Space," *The Body Politic*, no. 85 (July/August, 1982).

7. George Smith, "Telling Stories," *Fuse*, March/ April 1981.

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### The social problem film

by Jeremy Butler

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Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy. *The Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness, Despair, and Politics from the Depression to the Fifties*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981, 364 pages, HB \$25.00, PB \$12.95.

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"There's nothing like a deep-dish movie to drive them out into the open." — Veronica Lake, SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS

Genre film study currently languishes in an uncertain state. The question of whether or not it is a "respectable" methodology now seems unnecessary. Obviously these most popular of popular art forms can tell us much about ourselves and our culture. But a new group of problems has arisen. What is the conceptual framework of genre study as it has thus far evolved: Warshaw, Bazin, Kaminsky, Kitses, McArthur, Everson, et al.? (And why has the Western so dominated analysts' attention?) What theoretical constructs should genre analysis incorporate? And, on a more practical level, who possesses sufficient knowledge of the cinema (history and theory), sociology, United States history, current theories of ideology, semiotics, and, some would contend, psychoanalysis needed to properly analyze U.S. genres in the context of U.S. society?

Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy's *The Hollywood Social Problem Film* illustrates the difficulties that confront the genre analyst. They begin with two probable, but theoretically unsupported, premises: (1) the "Hollywood social problem film" exists, and (2) it was particularly important during the 1930s and 1940s. These premises originate in the popular, empirically derived conception of the so-called "movie with a message." Roffman and Purdy barely pause to examine the evolution of the problem film concept before they proceed to chronicle it through four historical periods:

1. the system breaks down: the individual as victim, 1930-1933;
2. the system upheld: the individual redeemed, 1933-1941;

3. fascism and war; and
4. the postwar world.

The methodological trouble now begins in earnest, for their unarticulated assumptions about the cinema and ideology, coupled with the intuited tenets of the problem film genre, tangle about their ankles like a bothersome vine.

"If they want to preach a sermon, let them hire a hall."  
— Terry Ramsaye

The definition of a genre, any genre, remains a thorny issue. It goes without saying that definitions are determined by the critic, not inherent in the films, and thus these definitions are ever always delimited by ideology. The most we can hope for is a precise, unambiguous, and systematic set of criteria. For Roffman and Purdy, the social problem film is characterized in this manner:

"The focus of the genre is very specific: The central dramatic conflict revolves around the interaction of the individual with social institutions (such as government, business, political movements, etc.). While the genre places great importance on the surface mechanisms of society, there is only an indirect concern with broader social values (those of the family, sexuality, religion, etc.), the value that function behind the mechanisms." (p. viii)

Throughout this book, "government, business, political movements" are assumed to comprise what are called "politics" and are thus the rightful province of a social problem film analysis. "The family, sexuality, religion" are grouped as "social values," rather than "institutions," and are associated with sentiment and melodrama. The Hollywood social problem film is repeatedly criticized for displacing general "politics" into *personal* "melodrama." Or, better, politics and sentiment/ melodrama are seen as opposite poles, occasionally conflicting with one another. Consider this comment on Frank Borzage's *THREE COMRADES*:

"The death imagery and sentimental fatalism so characteristic of Borzage serves to further deemphasize the politics."(p. 210)

Quite the contrary, I would argue, fatalism, sentimentality, and the attitude toward death are the politics of Borzage's film.

Roffman and Purdy's understanding of social problems is based, therefore, on a too-narrow conception of social institutions. They assume the institutions are mere vessels to be filled with social values. Moreover, the social values they name (the family, for example) might well be considered institutions (see Althusser). Ideology (social values) and ideological state apparatuses (social institutions) cannot be so simply separated. Roffman and Purdy claim that the social problem film addresses is only institutions, but they themselves admit, "In a very



broad sense, a coherent ideological vision of the world is acted out in every [Hollywood] Formula movie"(p. 6) — hence, in every social problem film. Since ideological criticism is so broad and unmanageable, Roffman and Purdy imply, they will study only the films that deal directly with institutions, not with values. However, this limitation proves to be a difficult one for them to maintain. In the chapter devoted to Frank Capra (more about their vestigial auteurism below), they laud his films because,

"His purpose was to 'integrate ideals and entertainment into a meaningful tale,' so that the films are not so much about politics as they are about people whose crises reflect political viewpoints."(p. 180)

Couldn't the same thing be said about THREE COMRADES, or GONE WITH THE WIND, or RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK?

Why do Roffman and Purdy jump from the personal to the general, from sentiment to politics, from values to institutions, with Capra but not with many, many others? One chapter, "The Individual and Society: Darker Views of the Postwar World."(pp. 268-83) is indeed devoted to films which they acknowledge do not even truly belong within the genre — BODY AND SOUL, FORCE OF EVIL, and MONSIEUR VERDOUX. "They are instead films which exhibit a political purpose without treating a limited social situation or problem,"(p. 269) they explain. In contrast, the proper problem film's "function is to present a problem that calls for circumscribed change rather than to call into question some of the deeper values at the foundation of society."(p. 269) In short, the problem film addresses the institution; a film such as FORCES OF EVIL speaks to the supposedly distinct values supporting the institutions. Once again, I must ask, can such a distinction, between institutions and values, be made with any clarity or systematicity? If this distinction eludes us, as I believe it does, then the social problem film "genre" will be forever lacking perimeters.

"In certain pictures I do hope they will leave the cinema a little enriched, but I don't make them pay a buck and a half and then ram a lecture down their throats." — Billy Wilder

Perhaps these definitional criticisms are mere academic pedantry. After all, few genre studies are conscientious enough to specify their own assumptions. In fairness, therefore, I now turn to the book's aim as Roffman and Purdy state it:

"The purpose of this study is to provide a comprehensive overview of the cycles and patterns of the genre, examining the relationship between political issues and movie conventions, between what happened in American society and what appeared on its screens."(p. 305)

*The Hollywood Social Problem Film* is one of the more substantive approaches to genre. The 305 pages of text (excluding 17 photographs)

make it the longest genre study in my bookcase — putting to shame *Horizons West's* photograph-filled 175 pages (including filmographies). With the qualifications articulated above, Roffman and Purdy do reasonably interpret the plots of their favorite social problem films: *I AM A FUGITIVE FROM A CHAIN GANG*, *GRAPES OF WRATH*, *DEAD END*, *YOU ONLY LIVE ONCE*, the Capra films, and many others. (Minimal attention is paid to cinematic style — as most genre studies. Why is it that we assume style produces meaning only in film noir?) They also provide a credible bibliography, although it is a little slanted toward material on "behind-the-scenes" Hollywood. They also list several journals, including *Cahiers du Cinéma* (the English and not the French edition!) and *Screen*, but not *JUMP CUT*. As a gesture toward the comprehensiveness mentioned in their statement of purpose, they include a filmography of approximately 230 titles, noting release date, studio, director, scriptwriter, producer, and principal cast — in that order. Certainly work of this breadth needs to be encouraged. Were cinema scholarship truly mature we would have at least three or four such books on each major genre.

How then does the present book fair as genre analysis? As Roffman and Purdy explain, they are concerned with the conventions, first of all, of Hollywood classicism — the "Formula," as they refer to it. They specify several of classicism's characteristics: linear narrative, individual protagonist, conflict expressed in terms of violent action, covert expression of sexuality, clear-cut, gratifying plot resolution, studio mise-en-scene, and so on. Within this Formula, the problem film articulates its own recurrent pattern:

"... arouse indignation over some facet of contemporary life, carefully qualify any criticism so that it can in the end be reduced to simple causes, to a villain whose removal rectifies the situation. Allusions to the genuine concerns of the audience play up antisocial feelings only to exorcise them on safe targets contained within a dramatic rather than social context."(p. 305)

*The Hollywood Social Problem Film* is strongest when its authors concentrate on this pattern's deployment in classical Hollywood films. Weaknesses become apparent, however, as they try to fix responsibility for any one particular film. In this endeavor they fall back on that potpourri that has defined cinema history until recently: studio chronicles (usually lacking any financial records), star biography and memoirs, popular sociology, and occasional director or producer histories (Capra, Hitchcock, Cohn, Lubitsch, and so on). How each film is contextualized by Roffman and Purdy depends upon well-worn cinematic truisms. Hence, *I AM A FUGITIVE* is discussed in terms of its studio (Warners) while *MEET JOHN DOE* is considered only in the context of its director (Capra). Occasionally an actor's screen persona dominates a film's discussion: for example,

"If the persecutions are familiar and the finale all too

predictable [in DUST BE MY DESTINY], Garfield's cynicisms still rings true."(p. 149)

If no studio, director/ producer, or star seems to deserve credit for some aspect of a film, then Roffman and Purdy fall back on questionable ideological constructs:

"... the hard facts of the Depression demanded a shift in subject matter. Latin lovers and college flappers [of the 1920s] now seemed rather remote, completely unrelated to the changed mood and the overriding preoccupation with social breakdown. The romantic ideals of the thirties had to be more firmly grounded in a topical context."(p. 15)

The hard facts of a society's material conditions cannot "demand" a shift in its cinema's context. Roffman and Purdy's naive conception of the society/ cinema relationship in the 1930s can be sustained. only if one is willing to overlook immensely popular films such as THE GAY DIVORCEE, A NIGHT AND THE OPERA, and other similarly "escapist" fare. I assume they must know better than to posit a direct causal link between society and the cinema. But instances such as the above do not indicate even a working understanding of contemporary writings on ideology.

Looking back at their stated purpose, then, I cannot help but be disappointed. What troubles me most is the reliance upon notions of the genius auteur redeeming Formula conventions: King Vidor's

"classic social films of the late twenties and early thirties — THE CROWD (1928), HALLELUJAH! (1929), STREET SCENE (1931), OUR DAILY BREAD (1934) — are very personal essays that eschew most of the Formula trappings." (p. 58)

As happens so frequently in genre analysis, we are promised a study of genre codes and their evolution, but the authors deliver, largely, another auteur analysis (see Kitses, McArthur). Roffman and Purdy emphasize those films which they feel contain a "tension between a conventional form and a radical vision."(p. 7) In so doing, they fall prey to the old Romantic misconception of the artist, toiling away in his (the masculine pronoun is significant) garret, outside of the influence of conventions and formulas. Does it need to be restated that (1) all art is coded and (2) the relative perceptibility of the codes to a particular critic does not make the artwork better or worse?

Finally, I must articulate one additional criticism of the book as film history. Although it is important in a study of this nature to make as many definitive statements as possible, it would be more prudent if the authors had allowed for some qualifications. Roffman and Purdy state,

"The sole films to indicate any concrete relation between the heroine's prostitution and social circumstances are THE

My first thought upon reading this was of MARKED WOMAN (1937), in which the women's work as "cafe hostesses" (in name only) is repeatedly placed in the context of their economic situation. Assigning terms such as "the first" or "sole" to genre films is an unnecessary exercise and a scholastically dangerous one.

"Well: all that can be said is that the contrast between  
learning and amusing oneself is not laid down by divine rule;  
it is not one that has always been and must continue to be."  
— Bertolt Brecht

In sum, *The Hollywood Social Problem Film* is laden with many methodological problems — arising from the authors' empiricism and lack of sufficient self-criticism. However, it is an important book in its aspiration. We do need to understand, as they state, the relationship "between what happened in American society and what appeared on its screens." And, indeed, films which overtly apply themselves to social "issues" are a very tempting topic. But, most importantly, this endeavor must be made with the help of theoretical tools which we are still in the process of forging — tools that will help us understand the relationship of culture and society and, thus, the functioning of ideology.

### *Covering Islam* Knowledge and power

by Michael Selig

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Edward W. Saïd. *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1981. 186 pages.

Scholars rarely examine the political consequences of the knowledge they produce. After all, if they admit that a political dimension exists in academic activities, they then question the truth value of their own discipline and intellectual affiliations, thus risking treasured prestige and consequently some power. In film studies, when scholars resist taking a self-conscious political stance, most often that resistance manifests itself as their doing supposedly apolitical formal analysis or historical research. Nevertheless, the medium of cinema still lacks aesthetic justification conceded to more traditional art forms, and it is thus particularly open to political analysis. Since academics consider the commercial mass media in general as having so little cultural value, in fact, and find its commercial and industrial foundation so obvious, their suspicious attitude towards it (unlike attitudes towards literature, say) seems "natural."

In *Covering Islam*, however, Edward Saïd's political analysis of mass media coverage of the Islamic world opens up areas normally unexplored in mass media studies. We assume that the mass media may powerfully influence public opinion, especially about foreign affairs. However, what Saïd demonstrates throughout is that media opinions quite often derive from those academic and government "experts" to whom the media provides a forum. In other words, Saïd's contribution to media studies is the manner in which he situates the mass media within the context of their dependence on specific sources of information, principally academic and government institutions, for the knowledge the media disseminate. This is true of not only the news but also of supposedly "serious" drama, such as PBS's presentation of DEATH OF A PRINCESS.[\(1\)](#)

With *Covering Islam*, Saïd extends his analysis of cultural images of Islam, a project also undertaken in his generally historical *Orientalism* (1978) and more specific *The Question of Palestine* (1979). Here he deals with how the mass media produce popular images of Islam. He demonstrates how a centuries-old, academically produced image of the Islamic world has operated to foster Western colonialism. And he further shows how such negative imagery, repeated in media news, drama, and advertising, operates to justify U.S. hegemonic claims on Arab lands. In *Covering Islam*, Saïd employs the same critical tools he utilized in *Orientalism*, demonstrating that certain interests underlie the interpretation of other cultures and promote the institutionalization of certain interpretations as "knowledge." With this critical tool, Saïd moves to unravel the interests in Western society, especially in the United States, which operate in the media's coverage of Islam.

Thus, any sympathy for Saïd's argument requires accepting the premise that all knowledge is partial, interpretive, and vulnerable to influence from powerful institutions. Saïd rejects traditional theories of knowledge, which intend/ pretend to furnish objective truths and a non-political awareness, and which offer a discovered — rather than a created — "correct" point of view. Such concepts of knowledge make invisible the operation of political interest and will to power, factors which still shadow "objectivity" despite advances in interpretive theory and historiography. Saïd attempts to bring this shadow play of forces into the light. The book is not written to inform us about what Islam really is but to help us see how in many ways "Islam" stands as a concept which functions to maintain Western cultural and political hegemony.

It is in the nature of what we call knowledge that the particular gives way to the general, the different to the same. In Western and specifically U.S. views of the Islamic world, historical consciousness surrenders to "a small number of unchanging characteristics ... still mired in religion, primitivity, and backwardness." (p. 10) In the first of the book's three parts, Saïd focuses on how choices and interpretations of fact concerning the Islamic world are shaped within the context of a dominant Western viewpoint. Early, Saïd tells us,

"It is only a slight overstatement to say that Muslims and Arabs are essentially covered, discussed, apprehended, either as oil suppliers or as potential terrorists. Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arab-Muslim life has entered the awareness of even those people whose profession it is to report the Islamic world." (p. 26)

Saïd discusses the historical and ideological conditions shaping common pejorative images of Islam. Most prominently, the United States lacks a colonial past, as France and England had. Thus, the U.S. historical awareness of Islam is limited to a period of post-WW2, U.S. international economic hegemony. Without an historical awareness of Islam, the suddenness and immediacy of recent challenges to U.S. hegemony in the Islamic world have overwhelmed any real capacity here

for reflective, non-ideological thinking. As Saïd tells us,

“Representations of Islam have regularly testified to a penchant for dividing the world into pro- and anti-American (or pro- and anti-Communist), an unwillingness to report political processes, an imposition of patterns and values that are ethnocentric or irrelevant or both, pure misinformation, repetition, an avoidance of detail, an absence of genuine perspective ... The result is that we have redivided the world into Orient and Occident — the old Orientalist thesis pretty much unchanged — the better to blind ourselves not only to the world but to ourselves and to what our relationship to the so-called Third World has really been.” (p. 40)

Saïd discusses how the media rely on "experts" — in particular, scholars and government officials — to form this image of "Islam." In the second part of the book, Saïd analyzes in detail coverage of Iran during the overthrow of the Pahlavi regime and the following "hostage crisis." In part, the media's reliance on a predominantly Western political viewpoint derives from an image of Islam created by Western scholars implicitly (i.e., historically) tied to government policymaking, as those supported by the Pahlavi Foundation which finances Iranian studies in U.S. universities. Furthermore, the media demonstrate little concern about a reporter's experience in assigning coverage of Iranian issues. Rather they have an excessive concern with the dramatic and hence confrontational aspects of international affairs. The media function to cement a malevolent, ahistorical image of another people and culture. And overarching all the institutional factors, an unrecognized ideological commitment to Western capitalism and its modes of thought and perception determines the boundaries in perspective "beyond which a reporter or commentator does not feel it necessary to go." (p. 50)

*Covering Islam* presents a series of examples:

“All the major television commentators, Walter Cronkite ... and Frank Reynolds ... chief among them, spoke regularly of ‘Muslim hatred of this country’ or more poetically of ‘the crescent of crisis, a cyclone hurtling across a prairie’ (Reynolds, ABC, November 21); on another occasion (December 7) Reynolds voiced-over a picture of crowds chanting ‘God is great’ with what he supposed was the crowd's true intention: ‘hatred of America.’ Later in the same program we were informed that the Prophet Mohammed was ‘a self-proclaimed prophet’... and then reminded that ‘Ayatollah’ is ‘a self-styled twentieth-century title’ meaning ‘reflection of God’ (unfortunately, neither is completely accurate). The ABC short (three-minute) course in Islam was held in place with small titles to the right of the picture, and these told the same unpleasant story of how resentment, suspicion, and contempt were a proper response to ‘Islam’: Mohammedanism, Mecca, purdah, chador, Sunni, Shi'ite (accompanied by a picture of men beating themselves),

mullah, Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran. Immediately after these images the program switched to Jamesville, Wisconsin, whose admirably wholesome schoolchildren — no purdah, self-flagellation, or mullahs among them — were organizing a patriotic 'Unity Day.'”  
(pp. 78-9)

Working on a theoretical level, as well, Saïd makes some methodological suggestions about how to pinpoint interrelations between power and the generation of knowledge. Borrowing from Raymond Williams, Saïd recognizes that the creation of knowledge and images does not result from a monolithic, wholly determining (usually simplistically derived) ideology. He analyzes how ideological consensus is formed by powerful institutions (government, universities, media), and how that consensus "sets limits and maintains pressures" (p. 49) on the individuals and groups who produce conceptions about the rest of the world, and by extension, on ourselves. As Saïd tells us,

“When the American hostages were seized and held in Teheran, the consensus immediately came into play, decreeing more or less that only what took place concerning the hostages was important about Iran; the rest of the country, its political processes, its daily life, its personalities, its geography and history, were eminently ignorable: Iran and the Iranian people were defined in terms of whether they were for or against the United States.” (p. 50)

There is no conspiracy operating in Saïd's book. But neither does he provide a detailed analysis of the hegemonic process as it operates through the functioning of particular individuals, government agencies, and media corporations. Despite a wealth of evidence to support his point of view, Saïd hasn't analyzed how those ideas that compete with the dominant image of Islam become negated through the very real media processes. These processes include hierarchical decision-making, concentration of media ownership, broadcast regulation, economic constraints of news coverage, demands of space (newspapers and magazines) and time (television and radio), processes of hiring and firing personnel, and many other specifics covered in books like Edward J. Epstein's *News From Nowhere*. Saïd recognizes that some coverage is better than others but he doesn't explain how the more intelligent reportage has a negligible effect, even if he explains to some extent why we get so little good coverage. The book is more adept at this kind of detailed analysis and explanation when it treats academic institutions. But it presents the media as an homogenous entity with little or no deviation from the ideological norms outlined in the book.

Most valuable in *Covering Islam* is probably its last section, titled "Knowledge and Power." In it, Saïd advances a more coherent use of his evidence to demonstrate the often ignored association between government policy making and academia in their continual reification of Western political hegemony. This association is especially pronounced



in academic work on the Middle East. For not only do scholars write about Islam as a threat to Western civilization — a view held in concert with the government and the media — but the scholars themselves deny political partisanship. Saïd analyzes four Princeton University seminars on the Middle East funded by the Ford Foundation in a way that refutes the scholars' own self-concept of being "apolitical":

“In the choice of over-all topics and trends the four seminars undertook to shape awareness of Islam in terms that either distanced it as a hostile phenomenon or highlighted certain aspects of it that could be ‘managed’ in policy terms.” (p. 140)

Scholars' methodological naiveté compounds the institutional factors. Orientalism still considers itself to be producing objective knowledge about the Islamic world, "blithely ignoring every major advance in interpretative theory since Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud." (p. 140) In fact, Middle East scholars rarely ask methodological questions, in particular, questions concerning who profits (and I mean this literally) from the knowledge produced. As Saïd says,

“The obliteration of the methodological consciousness is absolutely coterminous with the presence of the market (governments, corporations, foundations): one simply does not ask why one does what he does if there is an appreciative, or at least a potentially receptive, clientele ... the overall interpretative bankruptcy of most ... writing on Islam can be traced to the old-boy corporation-government-university network dominating the whole enterprise.” (pp. 141, 144)

Fortunately, Saïd sees some hope in an "antithetical knowledge" being produced by younger scholars and non-experts. It is in his praise of their work that we can begin to discern what represents, for Saïd, knowledge "in the service of coexistence and community" (p. 153) rather than in the service of domination. Although Saïd offers no strict methodological program for the production of truly humanistic knowledge, he does suggest an attitudinal stance proper to such an enterprise. For Saïd, "knowledge is essentially an actively sought out and contested thing, not merely a passive recitation of facts and 'accepted' views." (p. 152) As such, the cultural critic must stand in opposition to the liberal democratic institutions which produce knowledge about ours and other cultures, and in sympathy with the "object" under investigation. We need an academic stance-highly aware of the political consequences of scholarship.

Thus, to produce knowledge, especially about other cultures, means to assert power, whether or not the scholar recognizes this. And in demonstrating this, Saïd has produced knowledge not only about Islam but about ourselves. In a most powerful way, he has shown how our culture has denied, ignored, and suppressed the ways it asserts power in and against a large part of the rest of the world. Against Western scholarship which parades in costumes of liberal objectivity and truth,

Saïd's work unmaskes the partisanship and political interest at work in our media and universities. Covering Islam reveals once and for all that the emperor, our emperor, has no clothes.

## Notes

1. *Death of a Princess* was a British film in docu-drama form of the well-known execution of a Saudi princess and her commoner lover presented by PBS on May 12, 1980. The presentation of this film set off a small international incident which is the subject of a short chapter in *Covering Islam*.

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# **JUMP CUT**

**A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA**

## ***If You Love This Planet*** **Gov't censors pick best short**

**by Janine Verbinski**

from *Jump Cut*, no. 28, April 1983, p. 64

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IF YOU LOVE THIS PLANET may be the first academy award winner to be labeled political propaganda by the U.S. Justice Dept. and forced to contain this ominous statement:

“This material is prepared, edited, issued-or circulated by The National Film Board of Canada, 16th Floor, 1251 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020, which is registered with the Department of Justice, Washington, D.C., under the Foreign Agents Registration Act as an agent of Canada. Dissemination reports on this film are filed with the Department of Justice where the required registration statement is available for public inspection. Registration does not indicate approval of the contents of the material by the United States Government. This act of censorship is certainly in keeping with James Watt's blundering attempt to censor the scheduled performance of the Beach Boys and various recent acts of censorship of Public Television.”

Among the ironic sidelights of the IF YOU LOVE THIS PLANET incident are: the Justice Department's labeling Canada as a "foreign agent." And they define a propaganda film as one that would

“influence a recipient or an section of the public within the United States with reference to the foreign country or a foreign political party or with reference to the foreign policies of the United States ...”

Yet PLANET does not greatly differ from other anti-nuke films currently distributed in the U.S. For example, EIGHT MINUTES TO MIDNIGHT is a portrait of Dr. Helen Caldicott, national president of Physicians for Social Responsibility, whose speech protesting the hazards of nuclear warfare forms the text of DO YOU LOVE THIS PLANET? (EIGHT MINUTES TO MIDNIGHT was funded largely by the National

Endowment for the Arts.)

When we consider the 17 films labeled political propaganda and subjected to the conditions accompanying this label, including an obligation on the part of the foreign agent to report the name of each theater or group showing the film, we better understand the seriousness of the incident. These films from Israel, Korea, West Germany, Canada and South Africa include titles such as Israel's PLIGHT OF SOVIET JEWRY: LET MY PEOPLE GO and a West German production promoting business opportunities in West Berlin, BERLIN MEANS BUSINESS AND MORE.

Various groups and organizations have denounced this crude government censorship. *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, *Variety*, *The EFLA Bulletin* and *The ACLU News* have printed articles denouncing the actions of the Justice Department. The Canadian government has asked the U.S. Justice Department to rescind its actions against IF YOU LOVE THIS PLANET and two other Canadian films on acid rain. The ACLU is filing a suit to overturn the Justice Department's decision. Among the plaintiffs are the Environmental Defense Fund, the State of New York (who wants to show the film as part of its education program on acid rain), the New York Library Association, Mitchell Block, head of Direct Cinema Ltd. (the U.S. distributor of the film), the Environmental Task Force and the Biograph Theater, Washington, D.C.. Senator Kennedy has requested that Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Strom Thurmond screen the three films for member of the Senate and call Attorney General William French Smith to account for the decision.

The Hollywood industry expressed its displeasure with the government's action by awarding PLANET the Oscar. As the government intensifies its effort to keep information critical of the administration's policies from the U.S. people, media makers must also intensify our efforts to inform and educate. A wide dissemination of PLANET will add considerably to this effort.

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### Puerto Rico's Super-8 Festival

by Maria Christina Rodriguez

from *Jump Cut*, no. 28, April 1983, pp. 64-65

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The film medium has been a source of fascination for Third World countries, where technique is given a godlike status and people are used to being passive spectators. Although many realize the importance of filmmaking as a tool to communicate with an immense number of their people who otherwise would be unreachable, the economic factor for would-be filmmakers has always been a stumbling block. So Third World countries remain as raw material for big studio productions from capitalist countries. Even though Puerto Rico has a particular relationship with the United States, it remains within U.S. policy for underdeveloped countries, in which they can only serve as settings for movies and as captive markets. It is only recently — within the past ten years — that these countries have discovered that filmmaking does not have to mean big studios, huge budgets, and unreachable cinematic techniques. The Super 8mm film format, originally devised as a toy for the U.S. family, has been rescued from that end to become a tool for everyday people interested in communicating through this medium. The Super 8mm format is on its way to becoming a sophisticated communication instrument within everybody's reach.

In October 1982, after individual competitions in international Super 8mm festivals (Quebec, Mexico, Venezuela, Portugal, and Brazil), a group of moviemakers in San Juan, Taller de Cine La Red, organized an *encuentro* (a getting together) of Super-8mm films from Puerto Rico and from other countries. Richard Clark, the director of the International S-8 Federation (in Montreal) brought a sample of the best international works in this format from Belgium, Quebec, and Brazil.

From Latin America, an excellent Mexican documentary by Luis Lupone, *QUE DIOS SE LO PAGUE*, traces the everyday chores of a pompous small-town priest. This documentary has a very strong social criticism of the Catholic Church in Mexico. Without a doubt, the best international Super-8mm animation film presented was Lewis Cooper's *THE LIFE AND DEATH OF JOE SOAP* (England), an excellent and sophisticated use of animated clay dolls. The film's antiwar message comes out loud and clear for all ages, especially since it was made during

the British war in the Falkland Islands.

Germán Carreño, director of the Cinemateca Nacional de Venezuela in Caracas, brought to the *encuentro* a sample of Venezuelan productions in Super 8mm. Venezuelans are using this format as a way to protest everyday aggressions against their communities, their environment, and their existence: CARENERO by V. Rodríguez denounces the contamination of water that resulted in the death of millions of fish in his town. CONTAMINACIÓN records the organization of another community to protest the air pollution created, by industrial waste. Using comedy and parody, Carlos Castillo in TVO and HECHO EN VENEZUELA portrays the consumerist impulse in bourgeois Venezuelan society.

From the United States, Nilo Manfredin was represented by GAY IS OUT. This film began with the various definitions of the words "gay" and "out" by characters posing as various gay stereotypes, only to arrive at no definition at all. This subject proved to be controversial to many in the Latin American audience. Kimberly Safford and Fred Barney Taylor of New York City presented a segment of LIVES OF THE ARTISTS. This work focused on local artists presenting their work and themselves. The Super-8mm format encourages their spontaneity and creativity. Although this type of art might be quite familiar to New Yorkers, it was not totally strange to the Puerto Rican audience. Old San Juan (where the *encuentro* took place) has its own sidewalk artists.

Puerto Rican filmmakers were able to present a variety of their work for the first time to a local audience that was generally unaware of the Super-8 format. Poli Marichal presented her animated films in which she experiments with sounds, colors, and drawing, scratching on the film itself. Douglas Sánchez, who now resides in Mexico, presented two fiction films that parody social mores in Latin American countries: FOTONOVELA and VIERNES SOCIAL. During a program of S-8 for children, Cánavos presented a story with puppets, CON AMOR SE FENCE AL DRAGON. Two filmmakers presented their own versions of childhood heroes: SUPERMAN by J. L. Mezo and TARZAN by Waldo Sánchez. A testimonial film made collectively in a film workshop directed by Carlos Malavé, MEMORIAS DE UN YAUCANO, records the testimony of a 110-year-old man who was a witness to the 1898 North American troops landing in Puerto Rico. He sings and narrates how the events of that time affected him — a young black working man confronted by a foreign white uniformed army. MAIZ by Waldo Sanchez traces the origin and the cultivation of corn by creatively combining the historical and the picturesque.

Puerto Rico's Encuentro Nacional de Cine Super-8 has given us an excellent opportunity to introduce this format to people interested in filmmaking but who up to now were unaware of it. Super-8 is undoubtedly an up-and-coming medium for developing countries like Puerto Rico. (For more information on the international Super-8 film scene, write to International S-8 Federation, 9155 Rue St-Hubert,

Montreal, Quebec, Canada H2M 1Y8.)

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# Latinos and Public Broadcasting

## The 2% factor

by Jesús Salvador Treviño

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From the time that the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) was created on 27 March 1968, there has been little attention devoted to Hispanic television programming in public broadcasting at the national level. Although close to twenty million Hispanic Americans yearly pay billions of dollars in U.S. taxes, part of which go to fund public broadcasting, only about 2% of funds for television production allocated by CPB in the past fourteen years have gone to produce programs specifically geared toward the Hispanic communities of the United States.<sup>(1)</sup> Even today there still exists no ongoing public affairs, cultural affairs, or dramatic series for Hispanic Americans.

The employment record within the Corporation for Public Broadcasting with respect to Hispanics is even more shameful. Despite a history of Equal Employment Opportunity Commission reports highlighting the lack of Hispanics employed at CPB, at the present time there is only one staff person at CPB who is considered Hispanic and that individual is counted as half-Hispanic and half-Native American! <sup>(2)</sup>

At a time when the national Hispanic population will soon become the largest ethnic minority in the United States, these facts are outrageous and shameful. They point to conditions on which immediate action must be taken.

### A HISTORY OF NEGLECT

It is true that in 1968 a short-lived drama series, "Canción de la Raza" ("Song of the People") was broadcast at many PBS stations throughout the United States. But this series, which raised expectations among Hispanic Americans of the potential for Public Broadcasting's impact on Hispanic communities, was not funded by CPB but rather by the Ford Foundation. From its inception until the time it funded the first national Hispanic series, "Realidades," in 1974, CPB's only allocations for Hispanic productions were minimal step-up funds for a handful of



locally produced shows which were later aired nationally.

Until "Realidades," the total of Hispanic programming at the national level was represented by programs funded by the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, programs often geared to adolescent audiences such as "Villa Alegre," "Carrascolendas," and "Mundo Real." On rare occasions, Hispanic themes and issues were "mainstreamed" as part of regular news and public affairs series such as "NPACT," "The Advocates," or "Washington Week in Review." There was no regular, ongoing, dramatic, cultural, or documentary or — for that matter — news and public affairs series for the Hispanic community.

### "REALIDADES" AND "OYE WILLIE"

In 1974, television station WNET in New York received a contract for \$60,000 from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to produce a one-hour pilot intended to serve the national Hispanic American population: "Realidades." In the next three years CPB spent \$400,000 on what became Season One (1975-1976) and \$553,902 on Season Two (1976-1977) of the short-lived series. A total of thirteen half-hour programs were produced the first season and ten programs were produced the second season. At the conclusion of the second season, the series was offered to the Station Program Cooperative (SPC) for continued funding but was rejected. It was the end of the series.

In the period of 1976 through 1979, CPB met continued pressure for an ongoing series for Hispanics by funding four producers to develop pilot scripts for series production. Awards totaling about \$153,992 were given to José Luis Ruiz ("Bless Me Ultima"), Lou De Lemos ("Oye Willie"), Jesús Treviño ("La Historia"), and KERA-TV ("Centuries of Solitude"). An additional award was made in 1978 for pilot production for the "Oye Willie" project. By November of 1979, three of the projects had developed pilot scripts which had been refused further support by CPB. Only "Oye Willie" remained on the drawing boards. A contingent of Hispanic producers from throughout the nation were outraged. In November of 1979 they addressed the board of CPB calling attention to the fact that less than 1 percent of its production funds for the years 1978-1979 had been spent in "stalling" the Hispanic community while at the same time rejecting pilot scripts for production. In 1980 the "Oye Willie" project received \$1.7 million for production. It was to be the second and, to date, only other national Hispanic series funded by CPT in its fourteen-year history.

### NO NATIONAL HISPANIC SERIES

Although efforts in 1981 have demonstrated the Program Fund's willingness to fund more Hispanic projects, there is still no stated or implied commitment to fund a national ongoing Hispanic drama series. The "Oye Willie" project, for what appear valid reasons, has not been funded for a second year, and other drama programs such as "The True Story of Gregorio Cortez" and "Seguín" have both been subsumed or "mainstreamed" into the "American Playhouse" drama series. Major

documentaries such as "Island in Crisis" and "La Tierra" have been mainstreamed into the "Matters of Life and Death" anthology.

## HISPANICS EXCLUDED FROM PANELS

One device advanced by the Program Fund of the CPB to assure equitable participation of minorities in the decision-making process of awards to producers has been the creation of advisory panels to CPB staff. Although the Program Fund's advisory panels are seen by CPB staff as "...structured to include minorities and women,"<sup>(3)</sup> in fact, scrutiny of the makeup of panels reveals Hispanic participation as sporadic at best. No Hispanics were invited to serve on the news and public affairs panels, which awarded an approximate total of \$5.7 million to programs like the "McNeil Lehrer Report," "World," "The Lawmakers," "Inside Story," and "Crisis to Crisis." No Hispanic groups or individuals were recipients of these funds either.

Similarly, the drama panel which awarded a commitment of \$7.5 million over a three-year period to the "American Playhouse" drama series included no Hispanics.

At this time it is uncertain to what extent Hispanics had input into the decision to fund a new \$5 million documentary series or the extent to which this series will employ, program, or address Hispanics and Hispanic issues.

## REPORTS AND STUDIES BUT NO ACTION

Despite a good faith effort in the past two years on the part of the Program Fund to rectify years of neglect in Hispanic programming, the overall percentage of production dollars devoted to Hispanic projects remains shamefully low — only about 2% of total CPB funds for television production over the past fourteen years has gone to produce Hispanic programs.<sup>(4)</sup>

The deplorable situation with respect to Hispanics outlined in this background is not new to either CPB board or staff. Over the years many reports and studies have been issued outlining the concerns herein expressed. The most impressive of these studies was a \$200,000 report which took two years to complete entitled, "A Formula for Change." This report, published in 1978, carefully documents and outlines affirmative action which must be taken to rectify inequitable conditions with respect to minorities and to Hispanics. Yet, three years after the "Formula for Change" report, how can there still be only one Hispanic employed on the staff of CPB? How can there still be no Hispanic series on the air? And why are Hispanics still being excluded from participation on key advisory panels of the Program Fund? What will it take to bring about equity for Hispanics?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The table compiled herein compares total funds allocated by the

Corporation for Public Broadcasting for television production with funds allocated for Hispanic television production.

2. As reported by CPB President Edward Pfister and CPB Board Vice Chairman Jose Rivera before an assembly of Asian, Hispanic, and black producers in Los Angeles on 11 December 1981.

3. Report by President Edward Pfister to CPB board, January 1982.

4. This table was prepared from information contained in the annual reports of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting years 1968-1981 inclusive and from other public information on Hispanic projects funded during these years. The table does not address distribution funds in which Hispanics have also been slighted to a degree similar to that in production.

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# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

*Birth of a Nation. Gone with the Wind.*

*The Greensboro Massacre*

## Racism, history and mass media

by Mark I. Pinsky

from *Jump Cut*, no. 28, April 1983, pp. 66-67

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In the first three-fourths of the 20th century the nation viewed the South much as that region saw itself — through the prism of Hollywood. Epic movies have always created powerful myths, but few have done the kind of lasting damage accomplished by D.W. Griffith's BIRTH OF A NATION and David O. Selznick's GONE WITH THE WIND.

Generations of U.S. citizens have had etched into their consciousness an image of the heroic Klansman on horseback rescuing the flower of Southern womanhood from the clutches of the leering black villain. The pivotal period of Southern history known as Reconstruction has been similarly portrayed with its stereotypes of sleazy, opportunistic carpetbaggers and traitorous scalawags. There is no way to calculate the impact of a single sequence from BIRTH OF A NATION showing black state legislators in the South sitting eating chicken in the legislative chambers with their feet up on desks.

Yet these images did not just spring from the filmmakers' imagination, but were provoked as well by the post-Civil War press, for political reasons. Later, such notions were reinforced by conservative white historians and taught as gospel in segregated classrooms.

A group of younger historians have offered a more accurate view of the Klan and Reconstruction. They argue that the Reconstruction was a very hopeful period of U.S. history. It included some of the most innovative attempts at fundamental land reform, economic cooperatives for marketing, universal male suffrage, biracial political coalitions based on class, the building of a genuine two-party electoral system, free public education, and expanded health care. The experiment was flawed by paternalism of administration and corruption, petty and grand. In the latter case, Northern railroads, determined to buy their way through the South, impartially corrupted whoever was in control of the legislatures of the time, black or white, radical Republican or redeemer Democrat. Ultimately the experiment of the Reconstruction was sold out by

national Republicans in the compromise of 1877.

The Ku Klux Klan became the shock troops used by conservative "Tory" or "Bourbon" Southern Democrats to crush Reconstruction and reassert their economic domination. Their ideology was race-based and their main tactic violence against the unarmed. Destructively, the Klan acted against the outnumbered and unarmed, by night and by ambush — not against rapacious armed men, as depicted in *BIRTH OF A NATION*. As Dr. Allen Trelease, professor of history at the University of NC at Greensboro and author of the definitive study, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction*, put it — there was not a single incident in all of his research where he could find Klansmen participating in any confrontation which might be loosely be described as a "fair fight."

In spite of their technical genius and grandeur, *BIRTH OF A NATION* and *GONE WITH THE WIND* obliterated the fact that racial cooperation has once been attempted and enjoyed some fleeting and scattered successes in the South during Reconstruction. Such an obliteration of history diminished the likelihood that any similar attempts might be made in the future. The combination of Klan and the monied class were a winning combination in the South, which thwarted the hopeful Populist movement of the 1890s, the post World War I black renaissance and resurgence of the early 1920s and the New Deal and CIO union drives in the South, known as Operation Dixie, in the 1930s and 40s. By the time of the civil rights movement of the 60s, working class whites were so accustomed to being manipulated into a violent reaction to any impulse toward racial, economic, political, or social equality that they acted almost reflexively, without the need for any cue or leadership from above. A tradition had already been well established.

#### *THE CLANSMAN, THE KLAN, AND BIRTH OF A NATION*

North Carolina has played an unique role in the history and development of the Ku Klux Klan in the South. Thomas Dixon, a North Carolinian wrote the novel *The Clansman*, a racist classic subtitled "an historic romance of the Ku Klux Klan" which formed the basis for *BIRTH OF A NATION*. Today 10% of the estimated 10,000 Klan members live in North Carolina. On July 9, 1979, members and supporters of the Communist Workers Party (CWP), a Maoist organization active in organizing textile workers in NC mills, showed up in the small town of China Grove, some carrying guns and wooden staves to protest a benefit showing of *BIRTH OF A NATION*. Taunts and fighting occurred, but no shots were fired. This began a series of events that would lead to the members

In fact, *BIRTH OF A NATION* has been used as a recruiting film for the Klan for years, and had a material role to play in the Klan's growth. In his book, *Hollywood: The Pioneers*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), Kevin Brownlow describes this relation between film and social structures at length. Following is a lengthy quote from that book:

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"Compared to Dixon's original, Griffith's racism was mild. *The Clansman* read like a tract from the Third Reich: '... for a thick-lipped, flat-nosed, spindle-shanked Negro, exuding his nauseous animal odor, to shout in derision over the hearths and homes of white men and women is an atrocity too monstrous for belief.' Griffith used none of this. Yet what remained was still alarming ..."

"... The mayor of New York ... ordered the License Commissioner to cut some of the most offensively racist material. No one will ever know what the material contained, but Francis Hackett in *New Republic* supplied a clue: 'The drama winds up with a suggestion of Lincoln's solution — back to Liberia — and then, if you please, with a film representing Jesus Christ in the halls of brotherly love.' About 500 feet were lost — although many cuts were the result of Griffith's attention to audience response ..."

"Rev. Thomas Dixon, according to his biography, conducted his own campaign among the powerful of the land. He showed BIRTH OF A NATION to the President. 'It is like writing history with lightning,' quoted Woodrow Wilson, whose enthusiasm won Dixon a meeting with the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Edward White. White was an intimidating man, and Dixon lured him to see the film by telling him of the President's reactions. 'You tell the true story of the Klan?' asked White. 'Yes — for the first time.' He leaned toward me and said in low, tense tones: 'I was a member of the Klan, sir. Through many a dark night I walked my sentinel's beat through the ugliest streets of New Orleans with a rifle on my shoulder. You've told the true story of that uprising of outraged manhood?' 'In a way I'm sure you'll approve.' 'I'll be there,' he firmly announced."

"With evidence that the President and the Chief Justice approved of the film, the NAACP found suppressing it extremely difficult. However, it was banned for ten years in Kansas ... and in Chicago, Newark, Atlantic City, and St. Louis ... The most depressing fact to emerge from the tumult was the revival of the Ku Klux Klan. This organization, which Griffith himself admitted had spilt more blood than at Gettysburg, had disbanded in 1869. The modern Klan began its clandestine cruelty on Thanksgiving night, 1915, on Stone Mountain in Atlanta, where in June, 25,000 former Klansmen had marched down Peachtree Avenue to celebrate the opening of the film ... The film provided the Klan with the finest possible publicity for its revival in 1915. The similarity between these two advertisements (reproduced here) is self-evident. The organization was to have been called the Clansmen. But whereas the film used a few hundred extras but made claims to 18,000, the membership in the Klan multiplied alarmingly. By the mid 20s it reached 4 million, and they could stage rallies and marches that were not outdone for sheer scale until November."

- Kevin Brownlow, pp. 65-66

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## VIDEO AS THE COURT'S STAR WITNESS

When the members of the CWP clashed with the Klan in China Grove in July 79, BIRTH OF A NATION was scheduled to be shown at a local community center. The film was never shown and in the course of a shouting and shoving match between the two groups, a Confederate flag was seized from the Klansmen and burned.

Stung by what all sides considered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the CWP, the Klansmen and Nazis vowed that the outcome would not be repeated. On Nov. 3, 1979, a motorcade of Klansmen and Nazis drove into the staging area of a CWP-sponsored "Death to the Klan" rally in front of a public housing project in a predominantly black section of Greensboro, NC. The Klansmen rolled down their windows and shouted racial epithets and taunts. Several of the demonstrators began beating on one of the vehicles with sticks which had been gathered to carry placards.

The motorcade stopped, several Klansmen climbed out of their vehicles and fired shots into the air, followed by a similar action on the part of the demonstrators. As the crowd scattered and a stick-and-fist fight ensued, a group of Klansmen and Nazis walked to the rear of one of their cars, unlocked the trunk, passed out rifles and pistols, and began methodically, almost leisurely, to mow down the leadership of the Communist Workers Party. In the space of 88 seconds, four lay dead, one dying, and a sixth critically wounded.

All of this was captured by four cameramen, three using videotape and a fourth with 16mm film. Before that sunny Saturday was out, local and national TV news outlets were broadcasting hastily edited versions of what later became known as The Greensboro Massacre. In NC, unlike in most states, still photos and films of alleged crimes cannot be admitted as "substantive evidence" in court. They can only be used to illustrate the photographer's or camera operator's testimony. If the witness is unable to recall independently a person or series of events which appears on the film, the jurors may not consider it and, in the case of a photo, may not even examine it. This unwieldy and really unworkable situation was resolved midway through the first degree murder trial of six Klansmen and Nazis when a package deal was struck by the defense and prosecution permitting the admission of photographic and acoustic evidence on a substantive basis.

In Greensboro, prosecutor Rick Greeson wanted the all-white jury to view a 16mm film as an illustration of the testimony of George Vaughan of WGHP-TV in High Point, NC, the cameraman who shot it. "At some point someone was screaming my name and yelling, "Get down. Duck," George Vaughan testified. "I don't know why I did it — I just kept shooting," he said. The only gap in his observation was the moment when the eyepiece of his camera was knocked away from his face.

His two and a half minute film, punctuated by the sound of gunshots and screaming, showed the incident in frightening detail. The jury displayed little emotion during the showing and later, when they were shown color photos made from the film. They were allowed to observe only the pictures which depicted what George Vaughan could specifically remember seeing.

Earlier in the day, a former reporter with another local station, Laura Blumenthal, then with WXII-TV in Winston-Salem, NC, completed her testimony on the shooting, in which her cameraperson, David Dalton, sustained wounds from a shotgun blast while filming from beneath the station's bullet-ridden car.

Defense attorneys say that their major problem with videotape in jurisdictions where the tapes provide substantive rather than merely "illustrative" evidence is that the tape's impact cannot be diminished through cross examination. There are also questions of technical enhancement and even manipulation of such tape. And there are other questions: Can the tape be shown to jurors more than one time, and in slow motion, stop action or instant replay? Should each juror watch on a separate monitor. Can an enlarged screen be used?

As a result, the jurors watched all four sets of film at least six times — at regular speed, slow motion and stop action, with sound and silent, as well as with the commentary and testimony of the camera operators. Six consoles were set up around the chamber and the lights were dimmed. (Reported plans from the Justice Department to construct some kind of hologram from the film had to be scrapped when too many blind spots developed. Two of the cameramen were standing together and one was wounded while shooting.)

Despite the extraordinary amount of photographs and ballistic and eyewitness testimony, each of the six defendants was acquitted by the all-white jury that heard the case. Remaining charges against the other Klansmen and Nazis were subsequently dropped by the Guilford County district attorney.

In the course of the Greensboro Trial, a showing of BIRTH OF A NATION, scheduled for the local branch of the University of NC, was cancelled after 30 black students appeared with signs to demonstrate.

#### DOCUMENTARY FILM: *THE GREENSBORO MASSACRE*

Sally Alvarez and Carolyn Jung produced and directed an 88-minute 16mm film on the Greensboro Massacre, with a budget of about \$30,000 and the sponsorship of the Communist Workers Party. New Liberty Films in Philadelphia provided camera, editing, and production assistance.

For legal and financial reasons, the new production company, Parallax Film Productions, decided not to request footage taken by local area TV stations, except the sequences used in court that became part of the



public record. Instead the directors chose to take a biographical approach, letting spouses, friends, and co-workers speak of those murdered. Those interviews with textile workers, white and black, recalling the three victims who were organizing unions at various mills were exceptionally moving and powerful, as were the testimonies of clinic patients who had been treated by the victims who were physicians, usually for free.

The film has a number of shortcomings. THE GREENSBORO MASSACRE still contains too many sequences with CWP Chairman Jerry Tung and Central Committee member Phil Thompson, walking around New York City and Northern New Jersey discussing the state of the U.S. economy and the impending collapse of capitalism. There are also a few heavy handed tricks, like cutting from a hog pen at feeding time to a speeded up sequence on the floor of the NY Stock Exchange.

The film does provide a valuable insight into the lives of those who died. Each was extraordinary, and their biography demonstrates the best a generation has to offer and contribute. Male and female, black and white and hispanic, Jew and Gentile, mid 20s to early 40s, parents of babies and teenagers, they all traveled to different roads that day. For director Sally Alvarez, a close friend and comrade of those who were shot down, the killings were a traumatic event which brought her back to NC from NJ, and back to filmmaking. She had originally studied video at the School of Radio, Motion Pictures, and Television at the University of North Carolina.

"I can remember when I was a teaching assistant at film school," Alvarez recalls, "showing students BIRTH OF A NATION over and over again. Everybody talked about the technique. But nobody said anything about the politics."

## **Notes**

Since Mark Pinsky wrote this article, the film's title has been changed to RED NOVEMBER, BLACK NOVEMBER. Reelworks, Inc. distributes the film from 39 Bowery, Box 568, New York, NY, 10002.

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# Character assassination — Jean Seberg and information control

by Margia Kramer and Renee Shafrensky

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## INTRODUCTION

— the Editors

Jean Seberg (1938-1979) was a prominent entertainment figure here and in France who contributed money to the Black Panther Party in the late 1960s. The FBI targeted her as a "sex pervert" and a dissident and, through their counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO), they sought to "tarnish her image with the public." In May 1970, the Los Angeles FBI office was authorized to plant a false letter with a gossip columnist. The letter stated that Seberg (then pregnant) had confided to the letter writer that the father of her child was a member of the Black Panther Party. The "story" ran in the *Los Angeles Times* and later in *Newsweek*. Seberg saw the story, went into premature labor, and the baby died shortly after delivery.

According to her second husband, Seberg's paranoia, despair, and suicide followed her surveillance and victimization by the FBI. Seberg's tragic life included an unusual commercial and avant-garde film career from 1956 to 1979, in which she played a range of roles which reflected the socialization patterns of women during that time. Her personal and professional life tells an important story about relations between individuals, the mass media, government repression, civil liberties, and political dissent. Unlike other Hollywood suicides — notably Judy Garland and Marilyn Monroe — in Jean Seberg's private life, films, and political victimization, the personal really becomes the political.

One month after Seberg committed suicide in Paris, New York artist-activist Margia Kramer petitioned the FBI for the actress's files under the Freedom of Information Act. The result was a series of exhibitions, film screenings, books, and a videotape constituting an extended biography of Seberg called "Secret." Materials used in recent installations have

included giant negative photostat blow-ups on transparent film of FBI documents on Seberg and the Black Panther Party. The videotape contains manipulated sequences of an ABC-TV documentary on Seberg and her harassment by the FBI. It also includes interviews with Seberg and her mother; a brief history of her life and film roles; and some sequences from the film *BREATHLESS* — such as Seberg's being followed/ chased by a man in dark glasses and, later, confessing to being pregnant.

In the following photo/text montage, JUMP CUT hopes to capture the essence of Margia Kramer's work on Jean Seberg and the issue of information control.

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## Jean Seberg, the FBI, and the Media — Margia Kramer

### ARTISTS DO COMMUNICATIVE WORK

If we start from the conception of the symbolic discourse and mental reflection in art, language, and experience as social and mediated, rather than individual, practices, then it follows that artists who do communicative work in society — alongside journalists — must be concerned with First Amendment issues, the Freedom of Information Act, and the government's circulation of information. Fundamental to expression is open access to past, present, and future information and our determination of its historical interpretation. This history reclamation project has been primarily a feminist, Third World, and left issue.

### TRENDS TOWARD INFORMATION CONTROL

Soft- and hard-core secrecy and the withholding of information by government and business are weapons to manipulate communication and ways of preempting interpretation, meaning, and discourse. The trend in our country is toward information control — anticipatory, illegitimate classification of materials relating to health, safety, crime prevention, and everyday life, as well as "national-security" — stored in centralized, electronic data banks.

### OUR REGULAR DIET OF "JUNK FOOD INFORMATION"

We live in a "junk food" information world, subsisting on a debased diet. The staggering amount of data we encounter tends to destroy and neutralize any sense of meaning. In the mass media, a hyperreal, staged and simulated content and form are broadcast, in which differences are homogenized to facilitate commodity production and consumption. This extinguishes any sense of reality, dominates the sphere of social communications and introduces a kind of "entropy of communications."

### THE COMMODIFICATION OF CULTURE

We live in a society where the culture industry subordinates culture to the demands of capital profits, masking the capitalist formation of political, social, and psychological functions. This commodification of culture degrades activity in the public sphere as culture no longer expresses human hope or the "unnatural" viewpoint but ratifies the alienation of individuals, the fetishism of consumer society, and the exploitation of labor for commodity production. Individual subjectivities are "collapsed" into the legitimated, ideosymbolic objects, images, and structures of multinational oligopolies, their interlocking directorates, and government.

A culture that belongs to us should be as diverse as ourselves and return to us the opportunity for reflection, leading to discourse about our real lives and condition.

### THE "COLLAPSE OF MEANING"

The causes of the "collapse of meaning" in modern life are various: the lack of critical analysis in an atomized society with a homogenized culture; the social surveillance of meaning in the media by the government and by business, whose goal is to keep the mass audience in a state of continual "reception"; the industrialization and commodification of life; the control of information and desire by means of obfuscation; the expansion of technological domination within the "free market"; the gap between experience and communication.

### THE SPLIT BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY WORKING AGAINST CULTURAL, SOCIAL, AND POLITICAL PRODUCTION AND FOR STARDOM

U.S. society was founded on the ideals of individuality, personal liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, which took the form of wealth, personal advancement, and power. Ironically, since the eighteenth century, while the majority of the population has gained representation, enfranchisement, and apparent political freedom, it actually suffers decreasing liberty through ecological impoverishment, hazardous environments, routinized labor, subordination to technology, and socially induced, internalized mechanisms for individual self-control. The founding myth of universal, personal freedom is contradicted by the total precision, bureaucratic homogeneity, and inexorable rationality instrumental to progress, expansion, and domination.

In any society where the production and consumption of surplus commodities by individuals in isolation are the primary activities, the capacities for generating meaning and action atrophy. The public sphere is reduced to a system for the distribution of neutral opinions and contingent relationships. Excessive isolation of individuals, a by-product of the extreme individualism of capitalism, leads to a gap between experience and communication, which divorces people from communal life. This encoded alienation works against linking cultural production to social and political production. Hence, the opposition of activist art to the pernicious and egregious aspects of unmodified individualism, as

commodified in stardom.

## ARTISTS CONFRONTING THE "COLLAPSE OF MEANING"

As non-instrumental controllers of the production, distribution, and interpretation of culture, artists constitute one of many minority groups within society. However, artists are potentially more powerful than other groups or individuals because their materials are consciousness and communication. Artists gain immeasurably by organizing and collaborating, enabling us to initiate actions by developing an advocacy culture, rather than by responding as adversaries to existing programs. The mass media tailor stories and information to fit the context and format of the media "sandwich." That is, news/ entertainment/ advertising (which, ironically, often remains our source for "true" information). Reversing this, artists can create new contexts for information. They can confront the "collapse of meaning" by forming epistemologies, rather than by following given structures of knowledge and meaning.

## JEAN SEBERG'S SUBJECT/ IDEOLOGY IN THE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SPHERES

The message of the Jean Seberg story is multileveled. The government entered her private life, rescinding her civil liberties justification. In a deliberate way, the FBI overlay one false image of Jean Seberg, that of a dangerous and immoral revolutionary, upon the star image manufactured by Hollywood. Hollywood's image was that of the provocative virgin whose sexual daring and social nonconformity has tragic consequences. Only by understanding and unmasking these codes of contradictory meaning can the artist effectively demystify, derail, and combat the hegemonic social and political manipulation of information and culture. Artistic expression opposing repression and "collapse of-meaning" is severely hampered by visible and invisible obstructions to information access, interpretation, and circulation. The circulation of information and the circulation of resistance, dissent, and opposition are all imperiled by current trends toward secrecy classification in the name of "national security."

## REAGONOMICS: WITHHOLDING INFORMATION AND RESTRICTING ITS CIRCULATION

From 1956 to 1971 the FBI carried on an aggressive secret war against American citizens in the name of "national interest," often without the knowledge of Presidents or Attorneys General. The extent of this illegal and covert defamation of information and of civil liberties was largely revealed by documents, such as the Jean Seberg file, made available through the Freedom of Information Act. But this has done little to curtail the proliferation of such activities. Currently, the Reagan administration is attempting to construct a secret government in thrall to monopoly business; to curtail once again civil liberties and the "public interest" in the name of "national security." Recently, three new Executive Orders have been signed on intelligence operations and

classification. Systematic attacks on the freedom of Information Act, the passage of the Intelligence Agents' Identities Protection Act, which prohibits citizens from publicly disclosing already declassified information, and the formation of the Subcommittee on Security and Terrorism in the Senate (along with the proposed House Internal Security Committee), all contribute to forming a legitimate base for the type of illegalities exposed in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and Watergate.

## ART SINCE 1968 AND THE INEFFICACY OF MODERNISM

Modernism, as it emerged in the early nineteenth century, was partly a reaction against the tyranny of closed systems, specifically in the form of political oppression. But its early naturalism and the notion that art is the only revolutionary force to change life and to liberate fully an inherently aesthetic world of the future were transformed by its later subjectivism. Modernism itself became authoritarian with an overriding faith in individual genius and universal truth.

Since 1968, however, it has become possible to perceive and continue a different direction based on the works of Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, the Russian avant-garde, the documentary movement, and the feminist movement. They demonstrate the need to work collectively and collaboratively in order to promote a symbolic discourse, among specific audiences, which clarifies moral and ethical views. In order to develop the critical faculties of these audiences, and to raise the individual's critical consciousness of everyday life, artists/ communicators in postmodern society must mix models from high culture and mass culture, reflecting images, forming strategies, and mapping routes from the materials and technologies of contemporary life. By developing art languages which delineate and encompass contemporary contradictions, we attempt to examine our shared political, social, and psychological environment. We do this so that reflection can lead to real participation in the self-government of pleasure and desire, so that public and private spheres can interface in real consensus.

## THE INSTALLATION

The physical setting of the documents in the installation is like dirty laundry in closets. They have the sense of an autopsy — black and red. And they're physically imposing and oppressive, so you have to squeeze around them in the small room. You can see through the words of one document to another, to the video screens, and hide and spy on people around you. The filmy, black screens of negative film which hang from the ceiling are like huge carbon papers sprung out of dossiers and drawers into the open. They are shiny and reflect the video monitors and people like fun house mirrors, swaying when you rub against them. They act as metaphors for the interlocking layers of fictions, slanders and propaganda; for the orders of meaning and the meaninglessness of contradictory information conveyed in conflicting, overlapping structures in society.

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The FBI was very cooperative in this case. I asked for the information in October and got about 300 documents by December — with massive deletions. I sent the documents out to four experts on FBI material. They would send them back to me and I would reproduce their marginal comments exactly the way they arranged them. It's real notation, not something I made up. The black bars over the deleted words convey their meaning almost subliminally. You don't have to be able to read them. They act as a barrier between you and information. They released information to show that Jean Seberg was really in the wrong, that the father was black and therefore she was bad. But what the information really does is indict the FBI for meddling in her affairs. For example, they taped phone calls which they had no business taping in the first place and named her a 'sex pervert.' She gave a total of \$10,000 to the Black Panther Party. The rest of her involvement is unclear. There are telephone transcripts in which she says she is doing some kind of translation work in Europe. The CIA obviously thought she was doing a lot of things in Europe because they put her on the Security Index and monitored her movements. But whatever she was doing has remained completely unknown, it's never been let out. If it's in any of the documents it's been so deleted I can't find it.

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Every time I see *BREATHLESS* it deconstructs more and more. I keep seeing parallels to her life and her political involvement, paranoia and persecution.

The character of Joan of Arc extends the taxonomy of female types of the Eisenhower years, from wife, mother and muse, to upstart and firebrand: the self-defined woman who threatens established social conventions by mixing masculine and feminine characteristics. This shift away from the fifties atmosphere of peacetime affluence and quiescent gender roles, during the Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon years, fixed Jean Seberg's mass culture archetype. Female daring and virginal innocence counterpointed and predicted the real events in which she participated: the civil rights and anti-war movements. Jean Seberg's subject/ideology connotes outsider female victim at the same time that it denotes insider stardom. Constructed in contradictions, negations and pseudo-events, her life and death are like one of the many unresolved detective stories in which she starred.

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## Jean Seberg: an American dream?

— Renee Shafrensky

[Renee Shafrensky is a film critic for *The Villager* and *The New York Rocker* and a free-lance producer. She is also the former director of the Collective for Living Cinema in NYC.]

The book jacket of *Played Out*, David Richards's new book on the life of Jean Seberg, describes her as "a Cinderella who didn't fit the shoe in a kingdom of suspect princes." Like Cinderella, Seberg was the stuff of fairytales, but the end to her story was tragic. She was found dead in September 1979 at the age of 40, parked in her Renault in a wealthy section of Paris with massive amounts of alcohol and barbiturates in her bloodstream.

Seberg joined a long list of "burned out" female stars who've suffered slow victimization, emotional exhaustion, and eventual nervous collapse.

We've seen it before in the life stories of Marilyn Monroe and Judy Garland. The "American Dream" gone sour again, played out — or was it snuffed out? (At first they called it suicide, but now they are wondering ...) What went on behind the screen to make this life so short? Harassment, overt and covert.

Seberg was married three times and each of her husbands became her director. The FBI wiretapped conversations of her personal affairs with members of the Black Panther Party. They went so far as to plant a story in the press citing the father of her second child as a black activist. She was often betrayed and spied upon by men.

Just as Garland came to represent the image of the forties and Monroe the fifties, Seberg was a sixties myth. Her life embodied the contradictions of that time.

First, there's her hair — a sexy, androgynous boy-cut highlighting cheekbones and framing her heart-shaped face in soft blonde — indicative of the sexual ambiguity of the sixties.

Next, picture the opening sequence of Godard's *BREATHLESS* (1959) with Seberg as an "innocent" flirting with danger, adventure, and death. Hawking the *Herald Tribune* in a T-shirt on the boulevards, she is the quintessential "American in Paris," an early American flower child.

The real story of Seberg's life starts in Marshalltown, Iowa, population 19,000, where her father was a pharmacist. After some acting in high school, she went off to do summer stock on the Cape, then fell into the hands of Otto Preminger.

As part of a huge publicity stunt to gain attention for his version of Shaw's *SAINT JOAN*, Preminger conducted a nationwide talent hunt for a young unknown to play Joan. Seberg found herself on the Ed Sullivan show, introduced as the girl who got the part. Beginning with *SAINT JOAN*, Seberg made more than thirty-even films between 1957 and 1976. Despite bad reviews, she continued working with Preminger and starred with Deborah Kerr and David Niven in *BONJOUR TRISTESSE* (1957). Based on a novel by Françoise Sagan and filmed on the French Riviera, *BONJOUR TRISTESSE* began Seberg's mythic persona in France. She played the part of the nihilistic daughter of a wealthy American playboy,



the first of many roles that would capitalize on her as a "free spirit." While filming, she met her first husband, Francois Moreuil.

Moreuil introduced Seberg to Jean-Luc Godard, and *BREATHLESS* followed. It was Godard's first feature film — Seberg often chose to work with unknown directors. Cast as a Bohemian expatriate, opposite the magnetic Jean-Paul Belmondo, Seberg's mythic proportions began to fall into place. As Mel Gussow of the *Times* put it, "She became a symbol to the young American women who dreamed about going to Paris to become Jean Seberg."

After Moreuil directed her in *PLAYTIME* (1962), their marriage ended. Romain Gary, a noted French novelist and diplomat, became her second husband in 1963. Seberg continued her career, developing her skills as an actress in Robert Rossen's *LILITH* (1964), with Warren Beatty and Peter Fonda. She gave what was generally considered as her best performance as the self-possessed Lilith Arthur, a sensitive, borderline psychotic whose pursuit of love (read: sexuality) is limitless and dangerous. Seberg was frequently cast as a woman run by her emotions. In Mervyn LeRoy's *MOMENT TO MOMENT*, made the following year, she's a lonely woman on the French Riviera who accidentally shoots her lover in a quarrel and pays a heavy psychological price for it.

In 1968, at the height of the cultural upheaval in the United States, Seberg returned to Hollywood. There, like many other liberal celebrities of the time, she became involved with social issues and radical activists. But unlike most of them, she became involved on a deep emotional level, which led to an affair with Hakim Jamal, a militant follower of Malcolm X.

In the same year, Gary directed her in *BIRDS OF PERU*, a film he also wrote and produced. It was typical of sixties art films on sexual obsession. Seberg portrayed a nymphomaniac tortured by her sado-masochistic husband. This was the first film to receive an "X" rating under the new Motion Picture Association of America code.

From that point on, Seberg's life was what Dennis Berry, her last husband, called "an objective paranoia": full of harassment, unsuccessful films, and affairs. In 1969, the FBI ordered an "active discreet investigation to be instituted on the American actress Jean Seberg who is providing funds and assistance to black extremists including leaders in the Black Panther Party."

In 1974, Seberg managed to complete a short called *BALLAD OF A KID*, directed, written by, and starring herself. It was about the meeting of two myths: the movie queen and the outlaw. There are obvious parallels between the film and her life.

Seberg blamed the premature birth and subsequent death of her second child on the FBI story. Her husband Gary stated, "Jean became psychotic after that," and he believed that the FBI rumors had driven her to suicide.

By the time of her death, Seberg was no longer the corn-belt innocent Preminger had encountered. She was a victim of a rightwing, moralistic government, her public's need for mythology, and her own emotional instability. Maybe this was the payoff for going to France as a "free spirit" and giving up on the American Dream.

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### Excerpt from a gossip column in the *Los Angeles Times*.

Let us call her Miss A, because she's the current "A" topic of chatter among the "ins" of international show business circles. She is beautiful and she is blonde.

Miss A came to Hollywood some years ago with the tantalizing flavor of a basket of fresh picked berries. The critics picked at her acting debut, and in time, a handsome European picked her for his wife. After they married, Miss A lived in semi-retirement from the U.S. movie scene. But recently she burst forth as the star of a multi-million dollar musical.

Meanwhile, the outgoing Miss A was pursuing a number of free-spirited causes, among them the black revolution. She lived what she believed which raised a few Establishment eyebrows. Not because her escorts were often blacks, but because they were black nationalists.

And now, according to all those really "in" international sources, Topic A is the baby Miss A is expecting, and its father. Papa's said to be a rather prominent Black Panther."

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## Conclusion

— Margia Kramer

You see her reconstructed through the FBI, through the media, through her film roles, through gossip columns, through her own sentimental recollections about her hometown. All these reconstructions stand along side each other and contradict each other. She's lost behind all that.

I had been in Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia. I had experienced things in Eastern Europe which I had *read* about but had never actually concretely experienced: surveillance, the bugging of my room and telephone, being followed. I felt very "surveilled." and I felt very much the political presence of repressive elements. I decided that when I returned to the United States, I would do work that really pushed the limits of freedom — so that I would experience how free I was and other people too. I returned to Paris, which was my first step into the "free world" in about five months. Jean Seberg died a couple of days after I arrived in Paris. Her death was really a shock to me. She was everybody's dream girl.

The mass media reports stories to fit a prevailing format. Reversing this, the artist creates the context to suit the story. An activist artist's task is

to produce and reproduce critical consciousness in everyday life. It's a critical way of dealing with information around you. If your goal is revolutionary change and if you unmask it, you can be a more conscious, reflective, responsible person in the process of your political and social actions. If you realize the degree of repression and hegemony in terms of censorship of information — this is what the piece is really about. We think we're free and we live in a free, democratic society. Yet we have to be aware of the limits that are imposed on us as citizens. Looking at her films and her career makes us aware how this affects all of us.

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### The last word Terry Santana

by the Editors

from *Jump Cut*, no. 28, April 1983, p. 72

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The death of Rosa Teresa Terry Santana in New York last December under very suspicious circumstances dramatizes the government's current unleashing of spying and repression against the left.

Cuban-born Terry Santana was an activist providing the New York press corps with up-to-date information about El Salvador, promoting and distributing films from Central America, including the feature-length *DECISION TO WIN*, and exposing the connections between the C.I.A., the DINA (Chile's secret police), and exile-Cuban terrorist groups.

Firemen responding to a fire in her apartment discovered Santana's body December 4, 1982. The door was blocked with furniture, and various small fires had been set. The body was discovered scarcely burned, lying on the floor. Officials conducted only a preliminary autopsy in spite of demands of Santana's associates for a full investigation.

Within minutes of the firemen's arrival, the F.B.I. and police arrived, took photographs, and seized all the documents there. The New York press reported it as a probable suicide or accident. They tried to link Santana to a Puerto Rican terrorist group, the FALN, which she never associate with.

Santana's associates knew her to be in good spirits and dismissed the suicide explanation. Given the police and coroner's coverup, the case looks like a probable political assassination.

Santana came to the United States from Cuba as a teenager. She worked in health care and as a journalist. She wrote for the *Daily World* and was a leader in the El Salvador Information Office.

That Terry Santana was probably murdered for her political activity does not come as a surprise to very many current activists who know the government's past role in tacitly allowing, if not directing, violence and

repression against the left. That Terry was primarily a journalist and cultural worker distributing DECISION TO WIN shows the vital importance of her political work at present. She was a threat just for distributing information critical of the current administration's policies. We can hardly appeal to the government for change when we know Reagan has thrown out the rulebook governing the C.I.A., the F.B.I. and other military and intelligence activity.

We mourn Terry Santana's death because it is a loss to the movement, but her example of activist media work can only increase our resolve to oppose capitalism and reaction in all its forms.

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